BOOK REVIEWS


Sawa Kurotani’s ethnography of Japanese corporate housewives living in the United States provides a valuable example of the importance of the scale of the home amid globalization. Two of the central questions are, ‘How is the local constructed vis-à-vis the global, and in turn, how do locally constructed cultural ideas and practices influence social actors in their engagement with global processes?’ (p. 9). In considering these questions, Kurotani looks specifically at the home and shows that globalization does not necessarily lead to cultural homogenization; rather, it can also lead to the drawing of clearer boundaries of difference. She describes this process, what she calls ‘the production of the local as an ideological construct’ (p. 8), by focusing on the homemaking practices of over 120 Japanese women, who have been transferred with their husbands to the US for a temporary period of three to five years (kaigai chuuzai). Overall, Kurotani provides an accessible and engaging glimpse into the complexities of home that often are overlooked or simplified in studies of globalization.

Kurotani situates her ethnography in relation to three major theoretical debates surrounding globalization: cultural (which for her is equivalent to national) identity amid transnational mobility; the role of domestic space in globalization, especially with regard to the reach of modern (Foucauldian) power; and the nature of mobility itself, particularly found in the unsettled division between ‘traveling’ and ‘dwelling,’ most often associated with James Clifford (1997). Kurotani acknowledges that the type of sojourning in question, a common aspect of transnational capitalism, does not fit neatly into either of these categories. Instead, she calls it ‘dwelling while traveling’ (p. 152), since many of the housewives refer to their overseas experience as a long vacation, despite the endless hours required to create a Japanese space. Chapter 1 reviews the theoretical debates at the heart of the study, none of which is too complicated for upper level undergraduate readers. For those already familiar with debates about globalization, mobility, identity, and the home, Kurotani’s ideas about homemaking in the face of global mobility hold potential for real theoretical advances in debates about the relationships of power circulating between the global and domestic. Specifically, Kurotani shows that although on the surface the process of homemaking in question seems to serve only the interests of global capital, the housewives’ dislocation also offers them the opportunity to question the routineness of their actions. Thus the practice of homemaking in the US offers a critical juncture in the reproduction of power serving the needs of transnational corporations.

One theme running through the book is the rise of the transnational mobility of capital and people and the reactions to this potential for movement by Kurotani’s informants. Chapter 2 describes anti-Japanese sentiment in the 1980s, caused by accusations of Japanese corporations dumping products onto US markets. The Japanese corporate reply
was to build factories and offices in the US that would hire local workers and create Japanese products that were ‘Made in the USA’. Automotive companies, like Toyota, provide some of the most visible and successful examples of these efforts. Significantly, these investments, which continue today, include the transfer of managers and engineers to ensure that ideas from corporate headquarters are correctly relayed to local employees. While Japanese corporate employees are encouraged to work closely with their US colleagues and even become more ‘American’ in the workplace, corporations also insist that employees retain distinctly ‘Japanese’ attributes so that workers can reintegrate into the home office in the future. The job of protecting the worker’s Japanese identity falls to the housewife, who is expected (by the corporation, husband, and herself) to create a ‘bubble of Japaneseness’ within the home.

Following a transfer to the US, Japanese housewives must create a Japanese home, the practice of which is described in Chapters 3 and 4. Kurotani introduces the challenges associated with homemaking in the US, from the increase in driving duties and the difficulty of finding Japanese cooking ingredients, to issues of difficulty with English and feelings of isolation in suburban neighborhoods. These chapters make for exhausting reading, as Kurotani details the sheer number of hours required (more than in Japan) by women to complete their domestic duties. Significantly, Kurotani finds that the additional work impacts on the women’s sense of personal identity. While in Japan housewives may participate in neighborhood and school committees, hobbies, part-time jobs, and other activities that take them out of the home. However, lacking many of these opportunities in the US, the role of housewife becomes the primary, and often the only identity of many of these women.

Quite controversially, but evident from her study, Kurotani argues that domestic space has been fully incorporated into the capitalist system. She calls the home ‘the location in which capitalism cultivates and harvests the docile and productive bodies that populate its factories and offices and submit to strict work routines’ (p. 18). Kurotani disagrees with the assertion made by de Certeau that the home is a sanctuary, but she refers to it instead as the space in which agents are more able to negotiate with power than in any other location. Therefore, although the housewives’ singular focus on the home and the home’s incorporation into the capitalist system means that the reach of modern (Foucauldian) power reaches into the home via globalization, Kurotani contends that the home is potentially ripe for the creation of alternate subjectivities. She calls modern power both ‘liberating and oppressive, enabling and repressive all at once’ (p. 19) in the home, but does not seem to consider the home the site for the overthrow of power. It is only the best site for negotiation with power. What will negotiation look like?

In Chapter 5, Kurotani turns to Gramsci to argue that precisely because the housewives consider their domestic activities ‘normal’ and ‘everyday’, and because these activities must be carried out with greater intentionality while abroad, the housewives can recognize when ‘cracks appear on the otherwise smooth surface of ordinariness’ (p. 193). Kurotani discovers that the time spent abroad allows her informants ‘to reflect on their life-as-usual vis-à-vis foreign others next door, to consider different kinds of life that exist outside the bounds of their Japanese middle-class lifestyle, and to revel in the realization that there is a possibility for a better way of living than they were led to believe’ (p. 181). That is, the wives make a home in the US that seems to reproduce incredibly conservative ideas about both gender roles and Japanese identity, but the homemaking experience abroad also exposes the women to different ways of thinking about home. Kurotani acknowledges that the women’s embrace of their new roles makes them even more useful to the power of global capital; however, she argues that it is significant that the women reflect on and
actively choose to fulfill their roles. In doing so, Kurotani argues that the women should not be seen as pawns of global capital, but proud producers of domestic space.

At first, this seems like a minor distinction, but the women stress the significance of the intentionality of their actions within the foreign other. For some of the women, time spent abroad opens a door for the renegotiation of domestic space and power. For instance, some wives are able to convince their husbands to take out the garbage or to grill hamburgers in the summer. The housewives regard these changes as major steps toward creating a more equitable home that would have been impossible if not for their time abroad. Readers expecting major changes in the housewives’ attitudes towards domestic work and the role of the wife may be disappointed. In fact, Kurotani, who is an expatriate Japanese herself, expresses some frustration at the wives for blindly accepting their traditional gender roles for the benefit of corporate interests. But part of the import of Kurotani’s study is that it challenges readers to see the home away from home through the eyes of the Japanese housewife and to understand the pride the women take in what they call their jobs. In other words, the relative significance of a change should not and cannot be judged from an outsider’s perspective. Another benefit of this study is that it follows women through time and space, from their arrival and adjustment to the US, through their eventual return and readjustment to Japan. In this way Kurotani emphasizes the fluidity of the home and its meanings, in contrast to typical notions of home as an unchanging location of stability.

Throughout the book Kurotani focuses attention on the continual negotiation and shifting meanings of home and identity in ways that parallel geographical theories about place and place-based identity. Unfortunately, Kurotani ignores geographical literature, which would have helped refine her arguments. For instance, the creation and maintenance of boundaries separating the inside (uchi) of the home with the outside (soto) of the other is ripe for engagement with geography. One continually feels that all of the work that geographers have done to incorporate insights from Anthropology, Cultural Studies, and elsewhere has not been reciprocated by other disciplines. But a shortage of interdisciplinary dialogue is a problem endemic to academe, and this problem should not prevent readers from gaining a great deal of insight from Kurotani’s book. I recommend this book to anyone teaching about globalization and wishing to include the domestic scale, as well as for anyone wanting to learn more about the critical place of the home in the midst of transnational mobility.

Reference

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Aihwa Ong argues that neoliberalism is not ‘the general characteristic of technologies of governing’ in ‘emerging countries’ (p. 3). Rather than universal, neoliberalism