

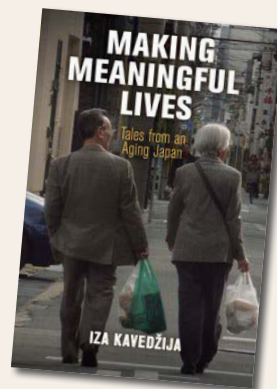
BOOK REVIEW

Making Meaningful Lives: Tales from an Aging Japan

By Iza Kavedžija

University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019
216 pages.

Reviewed by Ra MASON



In *Making Meaningful Lives*, Iza Kavedžija offers a unique, close-up account of the complex issue of aging in Japan. The book's greatest value is in its anthropological, ethnographic approach, which allows the reader to understand how aging is more than simply a negative process that results in gradual decline, or a societal problem that requires top-down policies to address. Conversely, the text examines a range of phenomena associated with the experience of aging, many of which are Japan-specific or affected by Japan's distinct sociocultural milieu. This allows Kavedžija to support her overarching argument that "the issues of aging and the good and meaningful life are inextricably connected" (p. 4). Furthermore, the book adopts the perspective of the author's interlocutors, providing a fascinating range of accounts that convincingly substantiate its central thesis and bring forth first-person insights into how aging permeates the boundaries between state-society relations and personal interactions within individual lived experiences.

The text is cleverly structured into a series of interrelated case studies, which narrate the relational nature of aging as lives in a story (p. 85). This allows the discussion to seamlessly transition from critically examining the elderly as subjects of care (chapter 1), and how they form and sustain active communities in response to government policies where mutual cooperation is essential (chapters 2–3), through to how community spirit and action allow meaningful lives to be well-lived (chapters 4–5). Consequently, the narration interprets a full gamut of human emotions and qualities, including love and loss, compassion and companionship, and purpose and ambition, experienced along one's life-path (chapters 6–7). It is refreshing to see the author unapologetically avoid an overarching conclusion simply for the sake of satisfying academic convention or readers' preformulated expectations. Instead, Kavedžija confidently asserts that her research illustrates that meaningful lives in the context of aging embody the "messy and multifaceted" (p. 163) in a form more suited to open interpretation than positivistic quantification.

The (inter)disciplinary approach, drawing on insights from post-structuralists such as Derrida and Sartre, sociologists of community like Richard Sennet, and leading anthropologists, including the Japanologists Joy Hendry and Ronald Dore, serves to generate an enthralling intersection of insights and observations. These allow the specific details of Kavedžija's elderly research subjects' lives to be contextualized within a broader,

historically informed discussion of aging in Japan. For example, stereotypical views about Japanese concepts such as *tatemae* and *honne* (social front and real feelings) are challenged head-on in the context of the lively but largely unfrontational political debates exchanged between her interlocutors (p. 75). Correspondingly, the transformative meaning and socially embedded role of post-retirement pastime practices within the case study communities are also revisited to thought-provoking effect (p. 77).

In terms of limitations, although understandable given the ethnographic focus and format, referencing is relatively sparse for an academic text, and is almost entirely absent from pp. 36–45, 101–105, 108–113, and 130–138, where individual dialogues take precedence. Methodology is another area where a degree of supplementation might have been beneficial. While it is clear that Kavedžija is conducting two subject-specific anthropological case studies of aging in urban Japan, more could have been said regarding the particular significance of the chosen locales and situations. The primary justifications for their selection appear to be that the Kansai region has been sparsely covered in the extant literature and that it incorporates large elderly populations of socioeconomic diversity (chapter 2). However, it remains unclear how representative the interactions between these elderly folks are, either within the wider body of the municipality or across Japan as a whole. The absence of a sustained analysis addressing regional differences, as well as other intersectional factors that account for cultural variance, is stark. A full explication of these methodological elements would have positively enriched the text. In addition, while the circumstantial, exploratory nature of the study is commendable and engaging, what it actually reveals by way of value-added insight is less clear—beyond the overlapping intricacies of aging social milieus present in two Osaka wards.

Nevertheless, Kavedžija's study offers an excellent and timely contribution to the literature on Japan's aging society. It supplies a highly original ethnographic case study approach that allows the reader to view aging holistically from the inside out. Thanks to the quality and depth of documentation and interpretation, it also convincingly translates and interprets the aging experience, although the wider implications of the research remain speculative in nature. *Making Meaningful Lives* argues persuasively that aging requires a radical rethinking in terms of how society frames individually lived experiences and the human creation of meaning.