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## BOOK REVIEW

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Thang, L. L. (2001). *Generations in touch: Linking the old and young in a Tokyo Neighbourhood*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 209 pp. Hardcover ISBN 0-8014-3843-8, \$42.95. Paperback ISBN 0-8014-8732-3 \$16.95.

The book, *Generations in touch: Linking the Old and Young in a Tokyo Neighbourhood* is about “generational reengagements,” a concept about bridging the gap across generations. This book was written using both a first and a third person point of view. The book is divided into 8 main chapters, each with its own accompanying sub-chapters. The author organised the chapters in such a way that she moves the reader from a macro to a micro picture.

Chapter 1 introduces the *Kotoen*, a pioneering facility with experience in multi-generational living and cohabitation. During her 10 months of research, Thang’s objectives were to study the advantages and limitations of deliberate attempts to link different generations together, how members can be brought to ‘face-to-face’ encounters, whether generational engagement is a phenomenon that will naturally happen when generations stay in close proximity, if institutions such as the *Kotoen* would help enhance an elder’s sense of purpose in life and ease the social stigma associated with institutionalisation, and whether children who grow up in such institutions would have more positive attitudes and perceptions of their elders. Thang’s rationale for conducting this study in the *Kotoen* was to determine the effects of generational reengagements and to see if it would be possible to employ the concept of generational reengagements in other countries which are also facing problems of generational distancing.

Thang sets the stage for her study by providing a literature review and theoretical framework. She employs a qualitative approach in this study. In order to maintain objectivity, she uses a number of methodologies in data collection: observation; video recordings; face-to-face interviews with the residents, staff, and children; questionnaires to parents; visits to other age-integrated facilities; statistical data; newspaper cuttings; and documentaries. She did not tape record her elderly subjects, but took notes instead, because they were not comfortable being recorded during their interviews.

Chapter 2 discusses the setting, the place, and the people involved in the study. Thang begins by describing the *Kotoen*'s location, in a ward in a lower socio-economic class area in Tokyo, and gives a comprehensive and vivid picture of the *Kotoen* facility. She even provides a blueprint of the facility and explains the security measures taken to ensure its residents' safety. She describes the *Kotoen*'s six main departments (nursery, elder care, nursing, kitchen, transportation and administration), in addition to describing two 'old-age homes' and six 'nursing homes.' Thang is explicit in differentiating the 'old-age homes' and the 'nursing homes.' Thang explains that initially, when the Japanese government did not like the idea of generational co-inhabitation, they cited active children being dangerous for elders. Now, however, the government is more open to the idea and even encourages the creation of more institutions such as the *Kotoen*.

The writer then proceeds to explain in detail the complex organisational structure and job designations held by the staff in the *Kotoen*. Seven members make up the board of directors, and this includes one resident doctor, a company president, three Buddhist priests of different sects, two consultants and 77 staff members. Thang also describes the residents and explains the requirements for one to be considered a member of the *Kotoen*. She provides a demographical

and ethnographical account of each of the residents. Most of the males at the *Kotoen* are divorced; they do not remarry because the culture frowns upon remarriage. The majority of the elderly did not finish primary education, due to war and poverty after the world war. There are conflicts between the old and newcomers and occasional conflicts between staff and residents.

The final part of chapter 2 focuses on the children at the *Kotoen*. They come from the lower socio-economic class, and their ages range from 1-5 years. Thang captures their daily activities in the *Kotoen* and the interactions they have with the ‘grandparents.’ One cannot help but notice how the children in the *Kotoen* behave in a collective manner. They sleep together at the same time, wake up together at the same time, get dressed together, eat together, repeat the same phrases together, and so forth.

In chapter 3, Thang describes a typical day at the *Kotoen* (especially in summer and autumn) with the hope to help counter the stereotypical perception of old-age institutes as being dull and passive. In this chapter, she stresses the *Fureai* (which means ‘contact’/‘communication’) ideology of the *Kotoen*. The *Kotoen* is portrayed as having an active life, but one that is bound by a rigid timetable. There are cleaning activities, designated bathing times, and morning exercises. Even the inter-generational interactions that take place daily are conducted in a collective manner. Since Thang was considered a part of the *Kotoen*, she experienced the way birthdays were celebrated at the *Kotoen* and witnessed the formality of such celebrations. All of these events, Thang explains, emphasise the value of the *Fureai*.

Chapter 4 focuses on the term, *Daikazoku* (big family). Thang focuses on the nursery graduation ceremony in order to see if the ‘graduates’ actually come back to visit or maintain contact with their ‘grandparents.’ Surprisingly, given the fact that in the earlier chapters the concept of *fureai* has been perceived as being highly successful, the graduates do not (or rarely)

visit their ‘grandparents.’ This may be because children pass the “baton” of *fureai* to the next group of children and relinquish their own membership since they do not feel that they belong to the *Kotoen* anymore. Thang asks, “Would deliberate efforts to reengage children and elders automatically mean a merging of the two groups?” Thang notes that because collectivism is emphasised, group interactions cause the elders and children not to remember each other’s names. On the one hand, the *Kotoen* encourages spontaneity and emotional involvement, but on the other, rules and regulations (such as discouraging favouritism) inhibit these involvements.

Chapter 5 focuses on ‘Respect the Elders Day,’ a national, annual event celebrated in Japan. The *Kotoen* has its own special event held on that day which is called the ‘The Golden Fair.’ Thang portrays the *Kotoen* preparing for this big event and explains in great detail the events that take place. Thang observes that such events instil the spirit of being *daikazoku* (living and working together as a big family), as well as the sense of belonging and of being appreciated. In this chapter too, Thang discusses the media attention that the *Kotoen* received and argues that the media actually helps to dispel the negative connotations and perceptions that have long been associated with an old-aged home.

Chapter 6 focuses on ‘exchanges’ or ‘reciprocity.’ The researcher observes that the *Kotoen* elders tend to reciprocate by taking care of the children, giving gifts (to both children and staff, although clearly forbidden to do so) and imparting their knowledge and culture to the children, in exchange for being a *Kotoen* member and being able to interact with the children. This form of reciprocity creates a sense of ‘utility’ and ‘usefulness’ for the elders, thus giving them a sense of purpose and satisfaction. Thang also wanted to see whether the *fureai* has any positive effects on the graduates. She found that many of the graduates developed a sense of empathy towards other elders, however, there is also a decline in interest in volunteering

activities as children grow older. On the whole, she says that living and experiences in the *Kotoen* do a great job of moulding and creating a more accurate perception of elders in children. In the final part of the chapter, Thang compares natural and the *Kotoen* grandparents, to see if there are any differences between them and finds that the latter have more free time to spend with the children, but the former tend to give more material items (e.g. money) to make up for the lack of *fureai* they have with the children.

Chapter 7 focuses on the realities that exist behind what has been portrayed by the media at the *Kotoen*. Thang reports that since the *Kotoen* is a pioneering facility in multi-generational living, most of the activities change over time and the staff modifies the programs accordingly to optimise *fureai* between the elders and the children. She reports that during her stay, she observed a decline in the frequency of involvement of the elders in the activities of the children. In fact, as they grow older, they become more withdrawn and more passive. Thang also relates that elders are more spontaneous to the younger children as compared to the older children because they derive a sense of usefulness being able to care for them. In this chapter, she also notes that the ‘grandpas’ are preferred by the children, as compared to the ‘grandmas.’ She proposes a hypothesis to describe this phenomenon: the grandparents take ‘feminine’ roles in child care because they want to redress their lack of opportunity in caring for their own children. Thang argues that despite the institution’s discouragement of favouritism, special bonding between the elders and the children does take place.

The final chapter summarises the major findings, the strengths as well as weaknesses that exists in the *Kotoen* and old-aged homes. Thang focuses on the collective behaviour of the Japanese society, and in particular, of the Japanese elderly living in the *Kotoen*. Thang argues that although many residents do not foster intimate relationships with many of the children due

to the 'rigid' system of collective behaviour, meaningful relationships flourish, giving the elders a positive outlook on life. She provides suggestions (e.g. children should be encouraged to volunteer to take wheelchair-bound elders on strolls) and puts the responsibility on the authorities (i.e. they should emphasise age-integration and not segregation).

Thang has the ability to capture details of the moment and to describe explicitly the people and place. Thus, it is not an exaggeration to say that, the complexities and multi-dimensional perspectives of the *Kotoen* depicted in Thang's study, clearly show the maturity of her understanding of the issues involved. On the whole, this is a rather frank and insightful book, mainly because the writer is truthful in addressing the strengths and weaknesses of her study. Her chapters and sub-chapters are clearly defined. The author also uses fairly simple and friendly language, which makes this academic reading relatively easy, even for the layperson. Pictures that capture the life of the residents at the *Kotoen* are also provided.

I would recommend the book for a course on intergenerational communication and also for a course on research methodology. Sociologists, linguists and anyone interested in intergenerational living and communication should read this immensely readable book.

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