Sara L. Friedman and Pardis Mahdavi (eds.)

(2015) *Migrant Encounters: Intimate Labor, the State, and Mobility Across Asia.*

At the core of migration lies the complex relationship between state forces and migrants and how this relationship shapes both the intimate and public spheres. State responses towards migration have been illustrated in existing literature as one or all of the following: (1) a pragmatic state that takes every opportunity presented by international migration according to the nation-state interest; (2) a neoliberal state that outsources migration governance and management to the market and treats migrants as commodified economic objects; and (3) a patriarchal state that regulates and controls migrants especially migrant women to maintain a reproductive division of labour based on gender, race and class as part of sustaining the ideal “purity” of the nation-state. However, these top-down approaches to state-migrant relations leave migrants as passive recipients of state discourses and migration regimes and fail to capture the complexity of this relationship. To fill the gap in existing literature, *Migrant Encounters: Intimate Labor, the State and Mobility across Asia*, edited by Friedman and Mahdavi, focuses on the “encounters” between migrants and state forces and how these (in)direct, (in)formal and/or (il)legal interactions engender changes, continuities and disruptions not only in migrants’ intimate lives, but also in the bureaucratic, legal and political landscapes in the receiving states, especially in the Asian context.

This anthology of nine outstanding essays from established Asian migration scholars is divided into three parts to cover the latitude and multiplicity of Asian intimate labour migrants’ experiences, trajectories and their encounters with the state. The first part, The Intimate Lives of Intimate Laborers, examines the reconstruction of the notions and practices of intimacy within cross-border marriages and (im)morality within transnational spaces that shape and are shaped by migration policies. In Chapter 1, Hyun Mee Kim presents a multi-layered representation of the value of remittances for individual marriage migrants, cross-border couples and home and host societies. Kim focuses on how cross-border couples create blurred boundaries between “love marriage” and marriage as an economic exchange that holds the key to “successful multicultural” relationships and families. This form of “unconventional” marital arrangement is produced and institutionalised by a patriarchal state that sees the productive and reproductive value of marriage migrants in Korea’s nation-state building project. In Chapter 2, Filippo Osella looks at how the intimate lives, sexuality and “immorality” of Malayali migrants in the Gulf countries engender “moral panics” and public criticisms during their short visits...
in and subsequent return to Kerala. The stigmatising and pathologisation of migrants’ sexuality is attributed by Osella to a hegemonic and normative middle-class morality discourse that is often buoyed and perpetuated by state apparatuses, local communities and the media.

In Part II, Pardis Mahdavi, Nicole Constable and Nobue Suzuki assess migrant-state encounters by looking at how legal and migration regimes that set the parameters of the “ideal” national families and how this “ideal” discourse marginalises and sidelines intimate labour migrants, such as migrant domestic workers whose “reproductive capacities” and “intimate choices” (p. 15) confront the categories and trajectories assigned to them by legal regimes. This section also tackles how deportability and illegality are in fact the undoing and reworking of state forces whose very same repressed strictures offer both opportunities and challenges to migrants. In Chapter 3, Mahdavi demonstrates how Kuwaiti citizenship and legal mechanisms serve as biopolitical control and management of migrant bodies especially of female migrants who are proscribed from exercising their reproductive rights and raising a family in the Gulf countries. As a result, migrant women “transgressing” legal, moral and patriarchal boundaries find themselves detained, deported or hiding, while their children rendered as stateless are left circumnavigating Kuwaiti nationality laws through informal channels, such as adoption. In Chapter 4, Constable similarly investigates the circumstances surrounding and consequences of migrant domestic workers’ intimate relations that necessitate tactics of circumventing restrictive migration policies in Hong Kong. To avoid deportation and to prolong their legal status with recognisance papers, migrant domestic workers take advantage of two legal infrastructures that grant asylum to refugees and investigate torture claims. Most torture claims are unsuccessful but the waiting time is a golden opportunity for migrants to earn more money and to finally decide what to do with their present circumstance. Meanwhile, Suzuki in Chapter 5 details the successes of Filipino migrant workers in obtaining legal citizenship for their children with Japanese fathers. But like a double-edged sword, this “prized” Japanese citizenship as a symbolic and economic capital becomes a source of burden, displacement and alienation for Filipino-Japanese children who grew up in the Philippines and joined their mothers in Japan in their older age.

The migrant-state encounter is further analysed in the last section of the book by focusing on state’s mechanisms to manage migration and how migrants respond to these mechanisms. Mark Johnson and Christoph Wildke look at “freelancing” as a creative tactic of migrant workers in Arab countries to counteract the gendered and suppressive system of employing migrant domestic workers. Given the state’s marginal intervention based on the notion of