Five decades into the post-1965 immigration, the first cohorts of immigrants have quietly begun the transition out of the labor force into retirement and old age. In 2010, one in eight Americans among the population aged 65 and older was of foreign-born stock, with Asian Americans reporting the largest proportions of elderly population among the post-1965 ethnoracial groups. More specifically, 22 percent of the Asian American population is expected to be 65 years of age or older by 2050 (174). In light of these trends, this book examines how second-generation Korean Americans renegotiate the caring responsibilities as their first-generation parents approach retirement and beyond. Specifically, how do children of immigrants take care of their parents over their life course? How do they make sense of their parents’ sacrifices? What cultural and filial expectations shape the meaning of such care work? This important book effectively addresses these three intricate questions, while providing original insights into the complex lives of immigrants and their children.

The book has several strengths. Theoretically, this book adopts a life course perspective to trace out the changing dynamics of family life over time. As the second generation transitions from adolescence to adulthood, the first generation also transitions from middle adulthood to old age. As children of immigrants, many of them serve as “brokers of culture and language” (2) from an early age—providing a crucial bridge between their immigrant parents and the American society. From translating for their parents to helping them pay monthly bills, the second generation takes on many pseudo-parental roles throughout their lives, a process that begins in their early adolescence. As their parents transition into retirement, the second generation finds themselves taking on even more responsibilities, including financial assistance, healthcare aid, and emotional support. Describing these forms of assistance as a “labor of love,” the book argues that these intricate negotiations and renegotiations of responsibilities provide the broader cultural contexts for our understanding of Korean American families.
Methodologically, the book draws on 137 in-depth interviews with Korean American adult children of immigrants from the greater Los Angeles and San Francisco areas who have at least one parent aged 55 or older. The interviews are rich and nuanced, rendering in vivid details the competing responsibilities and conflicting perspectives from these respondents. To the authors’ credit, they did a superb job in analyzing the interview data, painting the main themes in broad strokes while also maintaining a sharp focus on the findings’ implications for the second generation’s emotional well-being. To my knowledge, this is the first book-length monograph that explores the intergenerational dynamics among the post-1965 second generation as their first-generation parents enter old age. The portrait it renders is both compelling and surprising.

Substantively, the findings provide an intimate glimpse into the competing, and sometimes contradictory, demands placed on the second generation. Specifically, the book develops the concept of “linked lives” (4), which refers to the intricate ways in which the lives of first- and second-generation Korean Americans are interconnected. For some, these linkages are bound by an obligation among the second generation to give back to their parents, whose many sacrifices have made it possible for the second generation to pursue their American dream. For others, these linkages are driven by the rigid expectations of filial piety and are often fraught with resentment, anxiety, and stress. As the second generation reaches full adulthood, they become part of the “sandwich generation” who have to simultaneously care for their ailing parents and their own children. As the second generation welcomes the third generation into their lives during their beak-il (100th day after the baby is born) and dol (first birthday) celebrations, they also mark the first generation’s first milestones into old age with their hwangap (sixtieth) and chilsoon (seventieth) birthday celebrations. At times, these competing demands are pushing the second generation to their limits, with many describing the inherent challenges as they seek to balance both care work and emotional work to meet the multiple needs of their aging parents.

The majority of the second generation also report feeling ambivalent about this work or sense of responsibility. On the one hand, the second generation is quite sympathetic to the struggles for belonging, psychological distress, and discrimination that their parents faced, with the legacy of the Korean War casting a long shadow on the first generation’s experiences with trauma and hardships. As a result, the second generation feels compelled to fulfill their end of “the immigrant bargain” (to borrow a concept coined by the sociologist Robert C. Smith and developed by the sociologist Vivian Louie) and feels obligated to give back to their parents. On the other hand, the second generation struggles with choosing between their interests and fulfilling their parents’ expectations, including getting a good education, choosing the right profession, and marrying a co-ethnic partner. This gulf between the second generation’s need for self-care and the first generation’s demands often creates significant intergenerational conflicts.

Over time, these conflicting demands take a psychological toll on the second generation, with many of them reportedly seeking therapy for depression and stress. Three examples illustrate these key themes. First, despite the more egalitarian gender norms among the Korean second generation, women disproportionately report that they shoulder the burden of caring for aging parents. They are
responsible for not only their parents, but also their parents-in-law. Second, the intergenerational tension is also acute among those from a modest socioeconomic background, with many of their parents reaching retirement age with no savings or retirement incomes. As a result, their retirement places significant financial burden on the second generation, who reports helping with mortgage payments, living allowances, occasional vacations, and some remittances. Third, the aging first generation also faces significant barriers to affordable and quality healthcare. This takes on its own urgency as the second generation tries to navigate the complex healthcare system, essentially serving once again as cultural and language brokers in their parents’ old age.