

What Kind of Culture Will Japan's Beatles Generation Create in Their Old Age?

By Sekizawa Hidehiko

THE Beatles performed five times at the Budokan in central Tokyo from June 30 to July 2, 1966. Most of the 30,000 fans in the audience were members of Japan's baby boomer generation. Whether these people actually listened to the Beatles' singing is another matter, because the screaming drowned out any music emanating from the stage. I was unable to hear any of the Beatles' songs from my seat in the front row of the second level at their first performance on June 30.

Time flies. Those baby boomers who went into a frenzy over the four lads from Liverpool have reached retirement age. What kind of "silver culture" will they create in their old age? Taking a walk around the streets of downtown Tokyo will help to answer this question.

For example, let's go down to the Oazo complex in the redeveloped area in front of Tokyo Station. The building, constructed on the site where the old National Railways Building used to stand before its privatization, houses a huge bookshop with 1.2 million books, a hotel, 26 restaurants and six shops sell-

ing all kinds of goods. The glass dome that covers the space between this building and the two adjacent ones has become a popular place for the baby boomer couples to go for a stroll. The Oazo complex is located near a business area where the offices of many major corporations can be found; lots of businessmen visit, and it is always crowded.

It is not unusual to see middle-aged or older women enjoying each other's company in the area around Roppongi Hills, where so many of Tokyo's IT companies are located. In Japan, married couples do not always go out shopping together. The men will often go out for a drink with other men, and it is not at all uncommon for the women to go shopping with their female friends. Women of the baby boomer generation have high incomes and a lot of free time, so they often go out with friends to popular destinations in the city.

These women were in their 20s in the 1970s when famous fashion and lifestyle magazines such as *anan* and *non-no* first appeared. The baby boomer generation has grown older alongside such maga-

zines.

Next, let's take a stroll through Ginza, an area with over a century of history. In front of JR Yurakucho Station on the Yamanote Line, which runs in a circle around central Tokyo, there is a large discount store. If you step inside, you will come across the male baby boomers standing in front of large-screen TVs, pondering over whether to buy a plasma or a liquid crystal screen. Japan's economy started to pick up last year, and the purchases of such large-screen TVs by middle-aged or older men has greatly contributed to this recovery.

If you walk from Yurakucho toward the center of Ginza, you will no doubt bump into middle-aged men looking in the window of a second-hand camera shop. They will be dressed casually, wearing a hat to avoid the sun, slinging a small bag over their shoulder and wearing sneakers. What are these men – so immediately identifiable as being retired with time on their hands – looking at in the shop window? They are gazing at cameras by Leica, Nikon or Canon. While their wives are buying expensive French or Italian handbags in Ginza, these men are struggling to decide whether or not a retired man should spend more than ¥100,000 on a second-hand camera.

Just a few doors down from the camera shop, there is a store that has a long tradition of selling model railway sets. Here we can find middle-aged men returning to their boyhood days as they chat with shop attendants who seem to know everything about model trains. These "boys" of advanced age appear to be more interested in the model locomotives, electric trains and passenger carriages, which are more expensive than the Leicas in the camera shop window.

The baby boomers are already changing the face of Japanese consumer society. Let us take a look at how this change is occurring in each area.

First of all, at the fashion market, a



Photo: The Mainichi Newspapers

department store in Shinjuku has already had success with a new sales initiative. For women whose figures become less shapely with advancing age, the store has suggested wearing layered garments, an idea that seems to appeal to middle-aged female customers. Also, while it is not quite as strong a tendency as in the past, it has been the custom that older women should not wear brightly colored clothing. Women of the baby boomer generation are also challenging this taboo and, rather than go out to shop caring about other people's eyes, they buy such items online.

In the food category, with Japan's aging society, health-conscious products are selling well. For example, the baby boomer generation consumes large quantities of new types of yoghurt that increase the amount of friendly bacteria in the digestive system. Japanese traditional cuisine is the source of many effective nutrients for maintaining the health of middle-aged and older people, but a large number of the baby boomers prefer to eat meat dishes. Food manufacturers are now trying to create such products as frozen hamburger-style patties from sardines rich in good cholesterol. Many traditional Japanese cakes are made from soy beans, and some pâtisseries are now using those techniques to produce Western-style cakes.

For the already-retired baby boomer generation who now have plenty of leisure time, trips are a particularly attractive option. The baby boomers often visit hot springs in Japan. Europe and Asia are popular destinations for overseas trips. They visit art museums and go to the opera in Europe, and spend their time relaxing at beach resorts in Southeast Asia. Those who go to China and South Korea are interested in the local history and culture. Just as their European counterparts studied Latin, many Japanese baby boomers studied Chinese classics and are interested in visiting places associated with Confucius and viewing the scenery described by poets such as Li Po. In the case of South Korea, in addition to the cultural heritage of the Li Dynasty, an



Japan's baby boomer generation was crazy about the Beatles (Photo taken at the Budokan in 1966)

increasing number of travelers are visiting completely new tourist spots. The South Korean TV drama series, *Winter Sonata*, which was broadcast by NHK (national broadcasting corporation) was immensely popular among the female baby boomers. The desire to walk in the same parks and streets as the young lovers in the drama takes them all the way to Seoul.

In Japan, the Internet penetration rate among middle-aged and older people is very high, and Internet access through mobile phones is a widely spread feature. These days it is not at all unusual for women in their 60s and 70s to take photographs of their grandchildren with their cell phones and send them to friends of the same age.

We should also note that Japanese cannot meet their grandchildren as much as they did in the past, because their children are getting married later in life. An increasing number of middle-aged and older people seek to fill this gap by keeping pets. There are now approximately 20 million dogs and cats in Japan. The figure actually exceeds the total number of children in the country from infant to junior-high-school age.

The love and attention that older people would normally direct toward their grandchildren are now shifting to pets,

so while the number of children may have decreased, the number of beloved objects that fill the gap has not. The baby boomer generation now spends time walking with the dog rather than playing with grandchildren in the park. Needless to say, sales of pet-related goods are experiencing a strong upward trend.

If looked at in terms of days rather than years, the average lifespan for people in Japan is approximately 30,000 days. For Japanese, life can be seen as a "30,000 day-long great adventure," and we can divide those days into three stages. The first stage of 7,500 days (approximately 20.5 years) represents the period in which they are educated and grow to become adults. The second stage of 15,000 days (approximately 41 years) is when they are busy fulfilling their social roles in the workplace and the family. In the third and final stage of 7,500 days or more, retirement and liberation from social obligations gives them time to do whatever they like. Japan's rapidly aging society will surely produce a model for the "silver culture" of the future. **JS**

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