

Upon Reaching 60

By Takashima Hatsuhisa

On September 1st in the year 2000 – in Japan year 12 of the Heisei era – I reached the age of 60. In the West, once a person has reached 60, people simply celebrate the person's having lived 60 full years, and it is not that different from becoming 59 or 61. In Japan, however, the 60th birthday is auspicious because of the special meaning attached to what is called *kanreki*. This word basically means a completion of the 60-year cycle of the traditional calendar, but it is a little more complex than that. It is a word that comes from ancient China and refers to the completion of two different interrelated cycles.

Of the two, referred to as *jikkan junishi* (literally, ten stems and twelve branches), the *junishi* are the twelve years that make up a cycle in which each is represented by an animal. Even in the West, people have probably heard such phrases as “the Year of the Dragon” and that comes from these twelve zodiacal signs. The *jikkan* are ten other units, and it takes ten years to complete a cycle of these. When these two systems are linked together, it takes exactly 60 years for each combination of the first and second units to come together. For example, I was born in 1940, in the year that combines *kanoe* and *tatsu* (dragon), so in the year 2000 the combination *kanoe-tatsu* has finally come around.

Nowadays the ten units of *jikkan* are very rarely used, but the twelve zodiacal units remain, for example in the animal designs of New Year greeting cards. However, in Japan it is still customary to celebrate the sixtieth birthday



The author wearing a red jacket and a cap to celebrate his *kanreki*

Photo : Takashima Hatsuhisa

of both men and women as a completion of one cycle and the commencement of another. In the traditional celebration, family and friends gather together for a special banquet and the celebrant, wearing a traditional red sleeveless jacket and a red cap, receives words of congratulation from the assembled.

The red sleeveless jacket and loose red cap can still be bought in the Japanese clothing section of department stores. I am told that a set made of pure silk can be had for about ¥30,000 (about US\$270). Ten years ago when an older friend of mine celebrated his 60th birthday, a group of my colleague got together, presented him with the traditional garb and gave him a hearty

celebration. Even today, people are still in the habit of giving presents of, if not the sleeveless jacket and hat, at least something red—such items of clothing as a crimson sweater, vest or muffler.

Now, as to my own birthday. There was a celebratory feast, but neither jacket nor sweater, and even though I did not mention it, I felt a slight, lack of cheer. It appeared that friends of my age had the same feelings, so a group of us recently gathered together. One member borrowed a bright red sleeveless jacket and cap from a rental clothing shop, and those of us who wanted to took turns putting them on, with slight embarrassment, and having our pictures taken as we sipped a congratulatory glass of sake.

Actually *kanreki* is deeply moving to me. My father was born in 1907 and died in 1960, unable to live to his own sixtieth birthday. It wasn't that long ago that the average Japanese became able to live long enough to reach the age of 60. In my father's generation, the average lifespan of the Japanese was about forty-four years. Japanese women born in 1950 were the first, on average, to be able to attain 60 years of life, and it was 1953 when Japanese men reached the same landmark. Therefore, for a person like myself born in 1940 to be able to reach *kanreki* makes my life blessed in comparison with my father, so it's a good thing that I did dress up in red and shout “*Banzai!* (we did it)” on that occasion.

In Japan today, however, reaching the auspicious age of 60 is no longer a

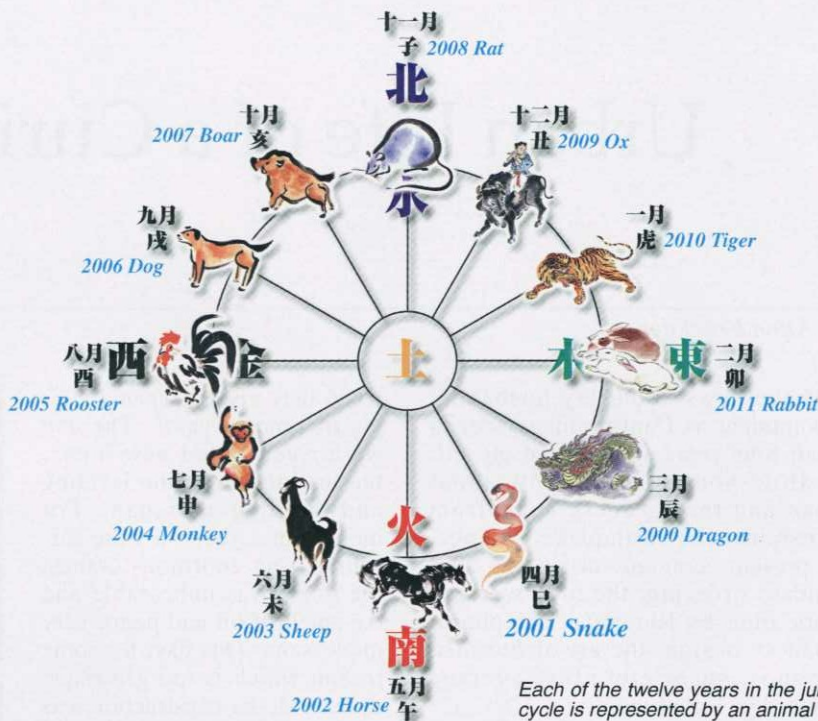
major event. The average lifespan for Japanese men is 77.16 years and for Japanese women the figure is 84.01 years, so one can hardly celebrate long life by having just reached 60.

At present, more than 90% of major Japanese enterprises have set the retirement age at 60, but large numbers of these firms are considering, in the near future, raising the retirement age to 63 or even 65. In a recent survey of workers, as many as 65% responded that they want to continue working beyond the retirement age of 60. A mere 12% replied that after retiring at 60 they would no longer work. Among these, 35% said that they would continue to work in order to maintain their current lifestyle, and 28% said that they were worried about supporting themselves in the future. Twenty-six percent answered that they wanted to have economic leeway in their lifestyle. It is obvious that almost everyone wants to continue working beyond 60 due to economic reasons.

I hear that in the West, people reach the end of their working lives by celebrating, retirees are wished a "Happy Retirement!" and most people see entering the pensioned life without having to work as a great pleasure. But in Japan, retirement is less the end of one's working life than the start of a second career.

I myself, upon reaching my sixtieth birthday changed workplaces from the broadcasting station where I had been working for 37 years to an international organization, embarking on my own "second career." Almost all of my friends, who recently took turns putting on the red jacket and hat, are continuing to work after passing the age of 60. Reaching *kanreki* is truly the starting point of a new life. Nevertheless, having started a new job, I have begun wondering whether it is really a good thing for *kanreki* to simply be a milestone in one's working life. It is said that a human being can be evaluated for the first time when the lid is placed on his coffin, and there are moments when I wonder what my own life will be like if I continue to work as I am now.

In Japan in the days when *kanreki*



was traditionally celebrated, human life was short, and those who had reached the age of sixty had probably achieved whatever they should have achieved. For a lot of people, the remaining years of life were to serve society, serve other people and spend on one's own self. Setting aside for the moment the question of whether or not these are possible, I have begun thinking about doing those things that I have always longed to do and wanting to spend my time in a way that will leave me smiling when the lid goes on my coffin.

According to the results of a recent report on the physical strength of older people, those over 60 years of age have 20% to 30% less oxygen uptake than those in their 20s and slower reaction. If that is the case, then the activity of the brain cells surely weakens rapidly after the age of 60. With the significant lengthening of the human lifespan, and the disappearance of withdrawing from active life after attaining 60, does it seem that *kanreki* is an opportunity for us to become aware that our lives are pitted against the passage of time?

To be honest, reality is tough. Within Japan's pension system, it has already been decided that the age for commencement of payouts will be delayed from 60 to 65 in the near future, in accordance with the increase in longevity. The raising of the retirement age to 65 is due to the increase in

longevity and the need for more labor. There is even talk of raising the retirement age to 70. Even though a person might begin thinking it would be nice to take things a little easier, that might not actually be possible.

Until now I have been thinking that I would like to continue working through my sixties and that I would like to run at full speed until I drop, but having actually reached *kanreki*, I have begun to reexamine my ideas. I have begun pondering what I ought to do with the rest of my life. Japan has the world's longest lifespan and has achieved a brilliant record as the second largest economic power in the world, but that does not offer satisfaction to my bewilderment, but rather leaves many Japanese with a sense of stagnation, unable to hold hope for the future.

Just as I hope that Japan in the 21st century will be serene and at ease, making itself happy and peaceful living together with other countries of the world, especially with its Asian neighbors, I too, making my second departure at my *kanreki* hope to develop my life in the 21st century as one of comfort and ease.

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