

# Life Styles in Japan's Aging Society

By Soichi Nasu

Japanese birth and death rates began to decline sharply around 1955. As a result, the number of Japanese over 65 years of age has now increased to 10 million, or about 9% of the country's total population, according to the national census conducted in 1980. This is still not as high as in the West European countries.

According to current demographic estimates, Japan's population will age very rapidly from the end of the current century into the beginning of the 21st century. In 1982 the average life span of Japanese men was 74 years and that of women 79 years, making Japan one of the countries with the greatest longevity in the world.

Because a large proportion of Japanese are now receiving higher education beyond the compulsory level, it is expected that not only an aged but a highly educated society should emerge towards the end of the 20th century. The consumption patterns among educated elderly people will become more sophisticated, and lifestyles will become highly diversified.

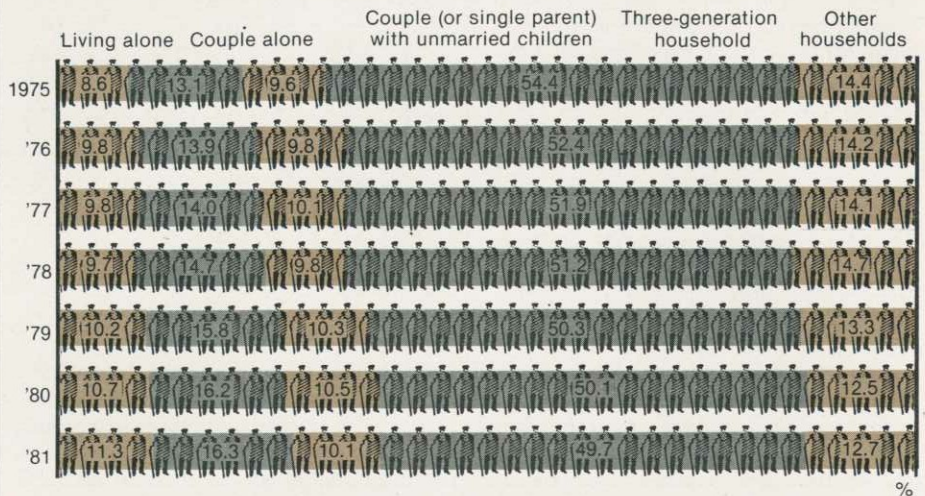
The lifestyle of elderly Japanese today exhibits three main features.

First, many elderly persons live with their children and grandchildren, constituting the so-called three-generation family. Secondly, many hold jobs. And thirdly, many are strongly motivated to study or engage in hobbies in their leisure time. These three major characteristics show that elderly Japanese want to associate their life activities with those of the younger generation. This is evidence of the Japanese people's inclination towards "groupism."

## Elderly People and the Family

According to a 1981 survey by the Ministry of Health and Welfare, households having at least one elderly person over the age of 65 now number approximately 8,745,000 (Fig. 1). This means that one out of every four households has at least one elderly member. Three-generation families accounted for 49.7% of these. Households of only an elderly couple accounted for 16.3%, and an elderly person living alone accounted for

Fig. 1. Component Ratio of Households with a Member over 65 Years Old



Elderly Japanese workers at a small Tokyo assembly works

11.3%. Although the proportion of three-generation households fell slightly in 1981, declining 0.1% from the preceding year, the actual number of three-generation households (5,800,000) increased.

There are an estimated 324,000 bed-ridden elderly people in Japan today, of whom 57.8% are members of three-generation households, 13.4% in elderly couple households, and 4.1% living alone. However, as many as 60% of the

bed-ridden elderly in need of physical and mental care are being looked after by three-generation households, indicating that in some such households more than one elderly person is confined to bed.

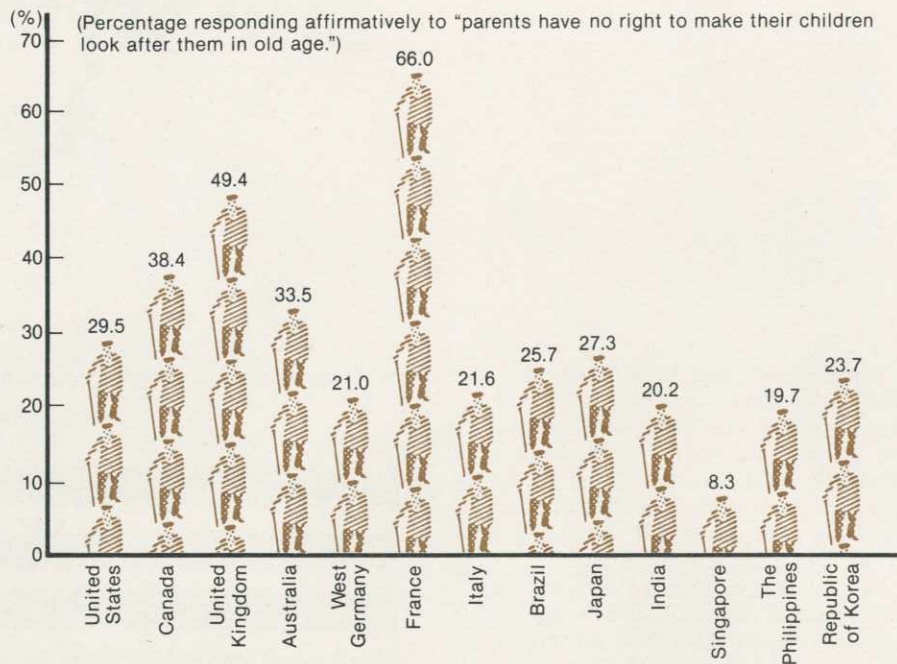
A 13-country survey on values conducted in 1979 by the Leisure Development Center of Japan with the help of Gallup International revealed significant country differences. Old people living independently of their children are apt to



be regarded in Asian countries as being "unable to get along with their children," while those living with their children tend to be regarded in West European countries as being "financially incapable of supporting themselves." Similarly, people in Asia and West Europe differ greatly in the values they attach to the family, depending on the weight they give to the husband-wife relationship versus the parent-child relationship.

A recent survey (Fig. 2) has found that the Japanese people do not necessarily share a common perception of the family, their thinking instead varying depending on conditions. Many respondents replied that they "could not say either way" when asked if they considered the husband-wife relationship or the parent-child relationship more important. However, the results of several different surveys do show a preference among Japanese for living with their children (especially the eldest son) in their old age, in common with other Asians. But elderly Japanese differ considerably from their Asian counterparts as to the manner of living with their children. A much greater proportion of Japanese than of Filipinos, Singaporeans, Indians, or South Koreans think that "parents have no right to make their children support and take care of them." The proportion of Japanese who think this way is actually smaller than among French and Britons, though greater than among West Germans. It thus appears characteristic of Japanese elderly people that they want to live under the same roof as their children but to maintain financially separate, independent livelihoods, or alternatively, to live mutually independent of

**Fig. 2. Comparative Attitudes on Child Responsibilities Toward Parents**



each other.

House ownership is an important prerequisite to living together with children. The house ownership rate among the elderly in Japan is extremely high compared with Europe and the United States. In Japan, the ownership rate in fact rises with age. Although the prices of land and housing in Japan are extremely high in relation to the income level of young people, this age group nonetheless has a very strong desire to own a house. This feeling is particularly strong among those in their thirties. It could be suggested that

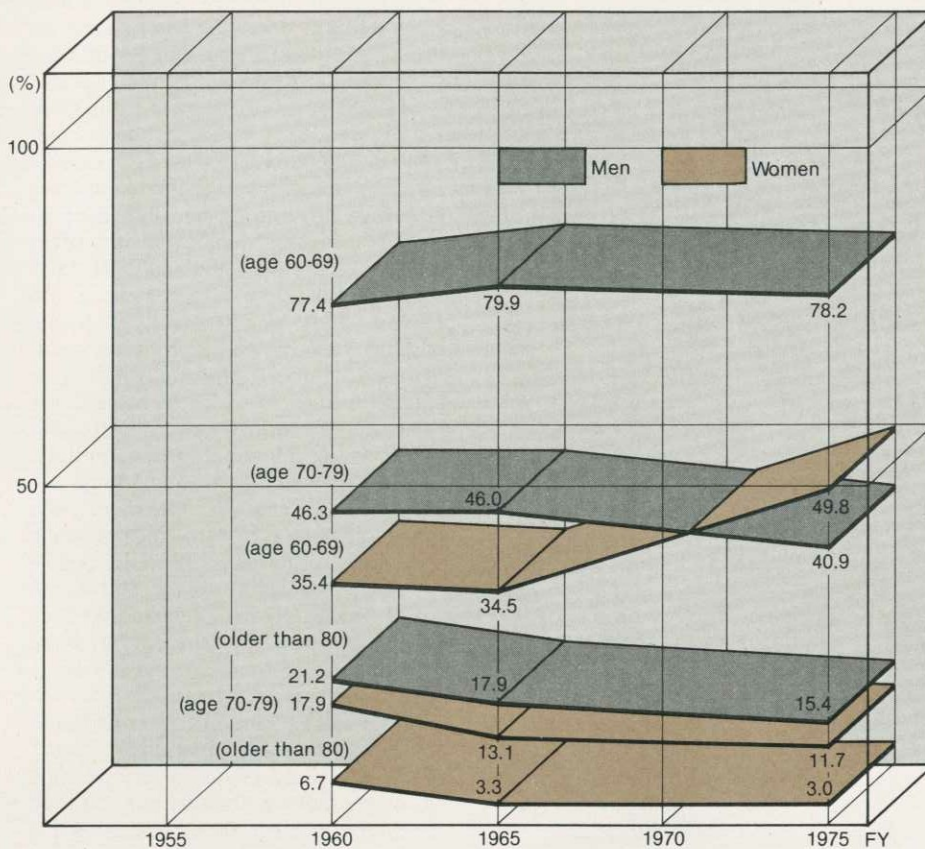
the housing situation makes it inevitable that the children's family live together with elderly parents.

Young people who are living in a separate house on the same plot of land as their parents' house maintain that they are "living separately from their parents," while their parents say they are "living together." Whatever the difference in viewpoint, the fact does constitute "living together." However, the parent-child relationship is no longer the traditional one of "domination and obedience." It is changing into a new form of "living together" in





Fig. 3. Percentage of Elderly Persons with Jobs



which both parties expect mutual assistance as equals.

It should also be noted that the number of parents living with their daughter's family is increasing among salaried workers. The percentage has increased from 10% of all two-generation families

10 years ago to 20% today. This is one of the most significant changes to have taken place in the two-generation family in the past 10 years.

The amount of labor needed to care for bed-ridden old people at home naturally differs according to the severity of the physical disability. In a serious case, it is estimated that it can take as much as 11.4 hours of labor a day to provide the bed-ridden elderly person with five categories of home service: bathing, help with moving around inside the house, dressing, going to the toilet, and feeding. Broken down, this works out to 15 minutes of assistance for bathing, three hours for moving around in the house, 30 minutes for dressing, two hours for going to the toilet, and six hours for meals. Even an elderly person with only a slight physical disability is said to require 2.4 hours of help a day.

Social workers presently provide about 30% of the care required by the bed-ridden elderly. Given an expected increase in the number of bed-ridden old people in the future, social welfare service requirements are expected to increase about 1.5 times in the next 10 years. This raises the possibility that demand for women welfare workers will increase in the future. It may also become necessary to robotize or automate the household chores of the elderly or of people who are taking care of bed-ridden elderly people. The demand for domestic robots and automated equipment could increase rapidly in Japan.

## Career Vocational Patterns of Elderly People

The ratio of people above the age of 65 to Japan's total labor force in 1979 was about 40% in the case of men and about 16% in the case of women. Both rates were very high compared with the 10% or so figures in Europe and the U.S. It is one of the characteristics of the elderly in Japan that they desire to be employed (Fig. 3). A survey on the proportion of employed elderly people based on a random sample of 1% of the total Japanese population showed that employment among the elderly leveled off or decreased slightly during the 10-year period between 1965 and 1975. Broken down by age, employed men in their 60s decreased 1.7% during the period, whereas working women of that age increased 15.3%. Men holding jobs in their 70s and in their 80s and older decreased by 4.6% and 2.5% respectively, while women workers in their 70s decreased by 1.4% and those in their 80s and older by 0.3%. The decline is much smaller for women than for men. Among elderly persons aged 60 to 69, more women have jobs than men. In fact what is striking is that nearly half of the women in this age group have work-related income.

One of the factors behind this trend is the fact that many women in this age group are widows. Another is the increase in the number of single women in this age bracket living with parents older than 80. A third factor is the increase in the number of single women of this age living alone. This group represents women who did not get married when they were of "marriageable age" at the end of World War II. The fourth factor is the increase in the number of women of this age who, though living under the same roof with their children, either cannot expect or do not want to rely on their financial support. There has also been a slight increase in the number of childless couples in their 60s. In the case of childless couples, both husband and wife usually work.

A social factor contributing to the increase in working women in their 60s is the halving of the family income because of the husband's retirement. There is also the apprehension that the value of the money they saved up for old age will be eroded by inflation, while with the increase in the number of women getting a higher education, there has been a rise in the number of women with professional careers and special skills. Still another conceivable factor is the increase in the number of women engaged in the social welfare mentioned earlier.

At any rate, the increase in older working women is a major factor preventing a







Elderly workers demand better life conditions at a nation-wide meeting.

decrease in the number of employed elderly. The growing numbers of working elderly women will inevitably transform the lifestyles of families with elderly members. For instance, even if a married son or daughter wishes the mother to take care of the grandchildren or remain at home while the young couple goes out, a mother in her sixties may well refuse, even when she is living with her child's family. Another conceivable change is male participation in housekeeping, which could become an important factor influencing the morale of a couple in old age.

## Leisure Activities of Elderly Persons

In 1981, the Yokohama Municipal Office conducted a survey on how elderly persons spend their time. The survey revealed that elderly people without jobs had about four more hours of free time a day than those with jobs. The unemployed elderly spend an average three hours and 20 minutes of their free time

watching TV. A relatively large number said they spend much of their remaining free time "taking care of grandchildren." Even in the cities, the average unemployed elderly person is apt to stay at home, watching TV and/or playing with grandchildren. Many make no attempt to participate in regional social activities after retirement, and morale sags perceptively.

Quite a large proportion of retired persons join old people's clubs. The rate of their organization into clubs is quite high, reaching 48.9% of those over 60. As of 1977, there were 111,230 old people's clubs in Japan. It is doubtful, however, whether such clubs give much meaning to the life of retired persons living with their children. Old people's clubs are being criticized for many reasons: they place too much emphasis on one-time events, such as festivals and folk dance meetings; they lack initiative in managing club activities and instead rely heavily on the guidance of central or local government offices; and boss figures control clubs, despotically converting them into a reservoir of voters for the conservative political party.

An old saying in Japan refers to, "learning something new at sixty," which means that it is never too late to learn. In keeping with this saying, quite a number of old people's clubs are actually groups of elderly people burning with enthusiasm to study and learn. Recently, the number of old people attending classes at culture centers operated by newspaper companies and other institutions has increased so rapidly throughout Japan that it is often remarked that old people's cultural activities are in full boom. In some places, old people's clubs operate—with financial assistance from central and local government—creative art projects which give meaning to their lives. These projects are initiated by prefectural governments with a view to teaching old people pottery, horticulture, knitting, woodworking and fish breeding, and provide them with opportunities to earn some income using their newly acquired skills. Old people participating in such "learn and earn" projects are mostly septuagenarians. They find it worthwhile to take part in these projects because they can make friends through such group activities.

Old people's clubs are classified into three types—the "participation in society" type in which old people derive satisfaction from making friends, the "study" type where members learn special skills, and the "work type" which seeks to link acquired special skills to income-earning. Some clubs sponsor exhibition at which members display their products for sale. One 80-year-old man who participated in such an exhibition said he kept his best work out because he did not want it purchased by people he did not know. He added that he feels most rewarded when relatives or friends to whom he has given his work as gifts express their appreciation. This shows that to old people, work and study mean acquiring something which they can give to others, and that they find social meaning in their own existence when there are people around who show appreciation for their work. ●

*Soichi Nasu is a professor of sociology at Chuo University and is a leading expert in Japan on problems related to aged people and aging society.*

*Nasu, 68, concurrently serves as president of the Japan Gerontology Society and president of the Association for the Study of Aging Society.*

*He has authored many books on gerontology such as "Employment Problems of the Aged," "Aging in Japan," and "The Modern Significance of Research into Welfare for the Aged."*