

Japan's Youthful Elderly

By Makino Takuji

It is estimated that Japan's aged population, that is the proportion of the population aged 65 or older, will reach 14% this year or next. According to the United Nations, a nation with an aged population of 7% or more is defined as an aging society, while one with 14% or more is classified as an aged society. As such, Japan is about to plunge into a new stage in the aging race.

It took only 25 years (from 1970 to 1995) for Japan's aged population to double, compared with 115 years (1865 to 1980) for France, 45 years (1930 to 1975) for both the U.K. and former West Germany, and an estimated 75 years (1945 to 2020) for the U.S. Japan's population is aging at a rate 1.8 to 4.6 times faster than these Western nations. Around the year 2025, according to a forecast by the Ministry of Health and Welfare's Institute of Population Problems, 25.8% of the population will be aged, leading to a "super-aged" society unparalleled in the world.

This is why, not only in political, governmental, and mass media sectors, but in every workplace, family, and even in elementary school classrooms, the phrase "the problems of aging" is being bandied about almost to the point of hysteria.

Regarding average life expectancy, Japan heads the list internationally. In 1993 the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MHW) announced that life expectancy for males was 76.09 years and for females 82.22 years, outdistancing even countries such as Iceland and Sweden, both noted for longevity.

The eminent American gerontologist and Pulitzer Prize winning author Professor Robert N. Butler noted the following concerning the impact of aging on the world at a conference for gerontologists held in Japan in 1988: "I have called this the 'Longevity Revolution.' The unprecedented gain of nearly 28 years of life expectancy in Japan and the United States and many of the devel-

oped nations in less than a century is nearly equal to what was obtained for the preceding 5,000 years of human history from the Bronze Age."

To put this statement in context, Professor Butler indicated that as we confront historical human changes it is natural that we will be at pains to cope with the accompanying various social factors. What is most important now is to take advantage of these changes through innovative thinking. To Japanese who are now frightened by the uncertainties of aging, this was indisputably appropriate advice.

Life expectancy for the average Japanese increased more than 26 years for men and over 28 years for women, not over a century, but in a mere 45 years. This abrupt change has naturally shaken Japan's entire societal structure and has entered into every facet of our lives. Revised social systems and perceptual changes appropriate to the longevity revolution will be needed, not to mention life-style revisions, and we cannot look to the past for models. We will have to devise modes of living appropriate to an aged, or super-aged, society ourselves.

Broadly divided, aging policies can be separated into two spheres: social measures and individual steps. Social policies would include overall employment, pension programs, medical care, and social welfare measures. Individual efforts that might be considered would include plans for one's own old age, career planning, life planning, adjustments in family and interpersonal relationships, health maintenance, and leisure plans. It is not enough that one or the other be fully in place—both must proceed smoothly or we will not be able to surmount the tide of aging.

For the present, one of the most urgent issues facing Japan is how the "young old" in their 60s and 70s who have retired, but have nothing to do, can make their lives as financially, socially, and spiritually stable and fruitful as possible.



Retired men dressed for work, sitting on benches, simply waiting for time to go by—a scene that is not unusual in Hibiya Park. The ideal is to create a lifestyle plan early in order to be able to enjoy life to the fullest after retirement.

Is there life after 60?

Mandatory retirement exists at 96.3% of Japanese companies. Of these, 9.7% have placed the retirement age at 55 or below, 10.3% at 56 to 59 years of age, 73.9% at 60 years, and 6% at 61 or over (according to a 1993 Labor Ministry survey of 6,000 firms). As recently as 15 years ago, retirement at 55 was the norm, but the move to extend the retirement age to 60 rapidly gained steam, particularly among large corporations. The total of number of companies that have set retirement at 60 or 61 and up has now reached almost 80%, far exceeding the 20% that set it at 59 or below.

As such, more than 90% of company employees experience the greatest ordeal of their career lives by their 60th birthday. Then, except for the tiny minority that finds further employment at affiliated companies or smaller firms, the great majority head directly and reluctantly into retirement.

The average life expectancy figures mentioned above referred to life expectancy at birth, however, life expectancy for Japanese who have already reached 60 is calculated to be 20.08 years for males and 24.67 years for females. Most people who leave their job at 60 must live for another 20 years without employment. This is hardly the type of short interval that can be described as "old age" or "one's remaining years."

The Japanese cliché, "life lasts 80 years," has already become an undisputed fact and one-quarter of that long life is still to come after retirement. When discussing issues related to Japan's retirees, who are characterized by devotion to the company and a workaholic and collective identity so strong that it is probably unparalleled by any other nationality in the world, and on the other hand by lack of independence and social consciousness, along with a low level of activity outside the company (such as the family, community, or hobbies), it is necessary to inject considerations of social conditions with a focus on the company.

In Hibiya Park, located in the most prestigious area in the center of Tokyo's

business district, with the Imperial Palace and government offices nearby, groups of four or five elderly gentlemen gather every day to bask to their hearts' delight on benches or chat idly while strolling around the perimeter of the park: "Maybe I'll go to the library next door today. Or maybe I'll window shop at the department stores in the Ginza. A two-reeler at the movie theater would be good, too."

These men are former comrades in arms who shared the same trials and tribulations for almost 40 years at large world famous companies with offices in the Marunouchi district and now, retired with too much time on their hands, they have become useless veterans who long for their days of active service. There are even some among these former company employees who put their train passes in their pockets just as in the days when they were employed, wear the same clothes, take their briefcases in hand, and "head to work" each morning muttering: "I have nothing to do at home and I'd rather go out than quarrel with my wife."

However, since they have retired and cannot get through the front door at the company, they pass the time at parks along the way and, buying potted plants or other souvenirs, return home in the afternoon.

They may be extreme examples, but there were similar stories a few years ago. The wife of one of these retirees wrote a letter that was published in the letters to the editor section of a newspaper: "I can no longer stand to see the forlorn figure of my husband as he picks up his valise and goes out the door each morning. I want him to stop this charade of going to work already!"

For middle-aged or older salaried workers who devoted body and soul to their jobs and would still like to continue working, being thrown out of the place upon which they are most psychologically dependent through forced retirement results in the loss of a considerable portion of their income, the majority of their personal relationships, and the social standing and power symbolized by the titles on their business cards, not to mention their daily goals

and even, in some cases, their health.

At the end of the 1970s when there was still not much interest on the part of the general public, I realized that the pain of these retired company workers was primarily psychological and collected my research in a book entitled *Saraba, Kaisha Ningen (Farewell, Company Person, Toyo Keizai Shinposha, 1978)*.

Balanced lifestyle

For the "company person" whose identification with, or dependence upon, the company is overly strong, who has a poor sense of autonomy or social consciousness, and who has little or no niche in life outside the company, there is a strong tendency to be unable to recover from the shock when hit by a major career change such as mandatory retirement or a change of profession. I have stressed that independence must be nurtured from a young age and spheres of activities must be widened outside of the walls of the place of employment to overcome this kind of ordeal.

Around 1980, *kaisha ningen* became a sort of trendy phrase in society and soon even some companies began to voice their agreement: "A firm is not able to look after the company person who is overly dependent upon the company and that kind of person is not able to perform his work well, either." Recommendations regarding how to avoid becoming a "company person" were also written in many government documents. The recently-published Economic Planning Agency's *Annual Report on the National Life* (January 1993) strongly emphasized the need for a change from "company person to society person," as summarized below:

"In the midst of postwar economic advances ... a rising number of company employees have come to pass their after work hours and even their days off in pursuits related to the workplace, spending little time with their families or in the local community, with even friendships limited to within the company or work-related relationships, resulting in a situation that has led to the appearance of the so-called

'company person.' ... in recent years with regard to this situation, although it goes without saying that a sense of fulfillment derived from work achievements is important, many people have reawakened to the importance of personal relationships with family and friends, as well as opportunities through hobbies and education."

In order to promote the changes that will allow this type of escape from the "company person" mentality and allow youthful seniors to look forward to fruitful "golden years" the following measures, briefly summarized, will be needed.

First, on the administrative level, although retirement will basically be set

at 60, opportunities for employment should be maintained to the greatest extent in order to broadly achieve continued employment until 65 years of age. At the same time, creating varied job configurations for senior citizens who want to keep working past the age of 65 is necessary. Since it is predicted that the start of pension payments will be raised from the current 60 to 65 by around the year 2013, far-reaching measures are urgently required.

Next, on the corporate level, from the standpoint that it is a social responsibility for companies to play a role in promoting the social welfare of employees throughout their lives and creating a vital long-lived society, in addition to developing employment for older people, they should support self-reliance through shortened working hours while their employees are still working, increase long-term paid vacations, encourage participation in the community and leisure activities, and hold seminars on life planning and pre-retirement preparations, among other measures.

Third, on the individual level, in order to fully enjoy the long life cycle ahead it should be understood that life planning concepts are indis-

pensable and that a plan that encompasses life in its totality—health, finances, family, leisure, and interpersonal relationships—should be devised and implemented at an early stage before retirement. A shift from an overemphasis on work to a balanced lifestyle will result in increased independence and community consciousness.

It may take one or two generations before the "company person" can enjoy a happy retirement. However, signs of slight changes in perceptions have been detected.

In answer to several items regarding life-style satisfaction in a survey (released in March 1992) conducted by the Foundation of Senior Life Enrichment (a foundation under MHW jurisdiction) of 4,000 workers and retirees from their 30s to their 70s, 75% of the retirees answered that they were happy with their lives compared with the 61% of the currently employed group.

This kind of exceptional result in this sort of opinion survey is bad news for those who are currently employed, but is good news for retirees and younger employees who will follow after them. □

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ships, and I am optimistic that companies on both sides of the Pacific can do the same.

Meanwhile, I have noticed some development over the years that actually makes it easier to do business in Japan. There are fewer layers in the distribution system, which enables more competitive pricing on our products; some previously banned American ingredients have been approved for import into Japan; and the government now accepts U.S. test data instead of having imports inspected after arrival in Japan—formerly a serious export risk. All these are significant marks of progress, and I believe that a long-term

easing of trade barriers is underway, whether it makes headlines or not.

I do not underestimate the challenge of trading in the Japanese market, but I cannot emphasize enough how personally and professionally rewarding it has been for me. I continue to view new products, consumer trends and marketing ideas with an eye to how they will work in Japan, and remind myself always of the unflagging efforts that will be required to keep a foothold for my company and its products in this bountiful but competitive territory. If you have the vision, dedication and courage to accept this challenge, I encourage you to begin cultivating a

"garden" of your own, so that you can harvest rich rewards in the years to come. □

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