

Justice Across Generations

What Does It Mean?

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Chapter 9

Japan's Debates About An Aging Society: The Later Years in the Land of the Rising Sun

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Introduction: Controversies of Equality

The last ten years have seen in United States a sharp, increasingly strident public debate on the escalating costs of public health care and Social Security, which some have cast in terms of "intergenerational equity" or "intergenerational justice." One of its early provocations was demographer Samuel Preston's address before the Population Association of America in 1984, which argued that "transfers from the working-age population to the elderly are also transfers away from children, since the working ages bear far more responsibility for childrearing than do the elderly" (Preston 1984c). It was apparently this controversial speech that inspired Senator David Durenberger and others to organize the Americans for Generational Equity (AGE), which has done much to frame public debate in terms of justice and equity between generations.¹ Two particular charges are common: there are (1) unfair burdens on present middle-aged cohorts of our social welfare programs, especially Social Security and Medicare/Medicaid and (2) bleak projections of the future (in)solvency of these programs and their eventual, unsustainable contributions/benefits ratio. At its harshest, these intergenerational equity debates pit resentful middle agers against indignant elderly.

To a Japan specialist like myself, this raises some interesting comparative questions. For twenty years, Japan has devoted enormous attention and considerable public resources to issues and problems of retirement, pensions, elder care, the aging process, national health insurance, and such. *Rōjin mondai*, the "problems of the elderly," is a common term with a clever syntax to cover the double-edged feelings of problems both suffered by and caused by the increasing cohorts of elderly. Nonetheless, it is striking that there is no equivalent to AGE

¹For a critical look at AGE and its ability to create the debate about generational equity, see Quadagno (1989a).

in Japan (nor, for that matter, to AARP).² There have been no comparable debates about intergenerational equity or intergenerational justice in policy planning circles, the national media, or academic research. My essay takes this difference as its departure point. It aims to offer a comparative perspective—or perhaps a cross-cultural counterpoint—to the other chapters of this volume.

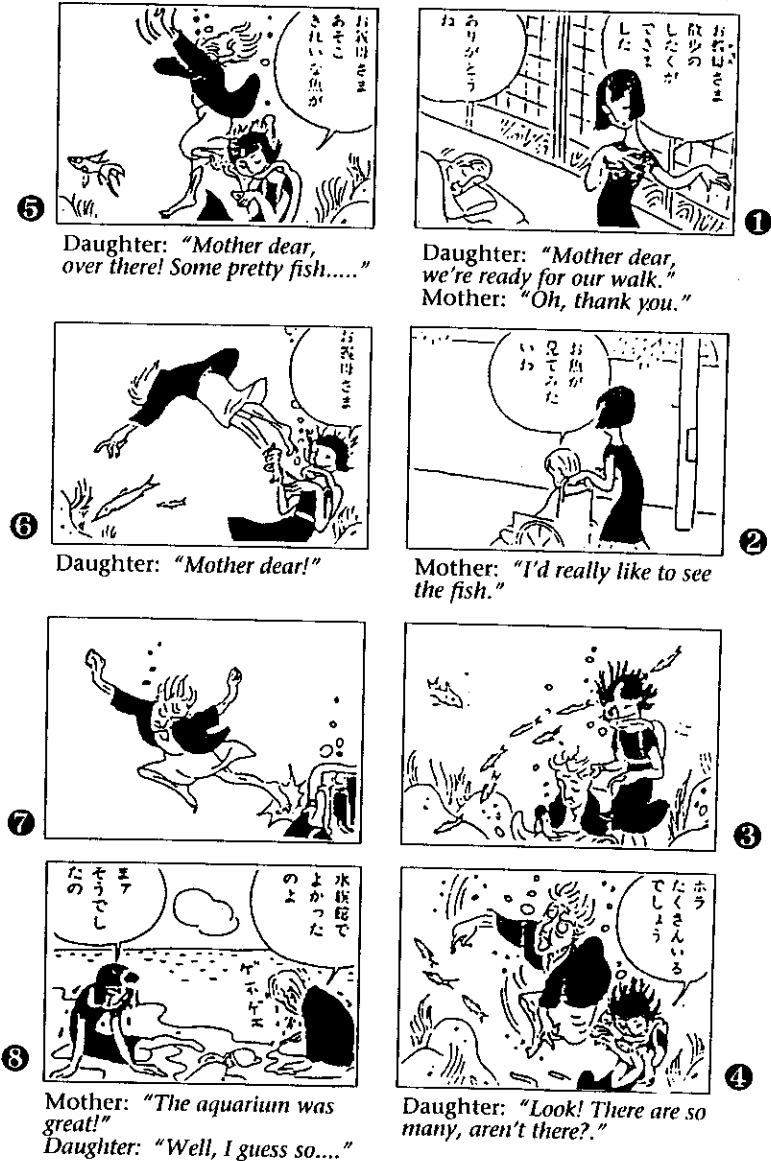
I hasten, at the outset, to dismiss several possible interpretations of the absence of debates in Japan about intergenerational justice. It would be quite wrong, for example, to attribute this to an ingrained Japanese predilection for avoiding conflict and preserving harmonious relations or to a lack of a tradition of “rights.” Subordinate individuals and subaltern groups have struggled throughout Japanese history, albeit in idioms that might be culturally unfamiliar to us. It would be equally mistaken to link it to an enduring reverence for the elderly that prevents acknowledging younger relatives’ frustrations and differences. Postwar popular culture offers many examples that disabuse us of such stereotypes. In 1947, for instance, the writer Fumio Niwa published “*Iyagarase no nenrei*,” a widely read short story about an eighty-six-year-old woman, Ume, who has outlived her own children and is being passed around callously by her granddaughters, who are forthright in their disregard for her as an irksome nuisance. The title itself, “the spiteful years,” quickly became a popular, sarcastic reference to then elderly.³ Several literary and cinematic versions of the folklore about Granny Dump Mountain have also been popular, including the international award-winning film, *Narayama bushi-kô* (*The Ballad of Narayama*). While there is no evidence of such places in rural Japan, stories have long circulated about a mountain where one brings elderly parents to die when they have outlived their usefulness to the family. And finally, among the vast corpus of contemporary cartoons are those which poke rather pointed fun at the tribulations of elder care (see Figure 9-1).

A more persuasive approach than national character lies in articulating culturally distinctive conceptions of equity and justice. This is most evident in the work of sociologist Akiko Hashimoto, whose 1984 dissertation I regard as the best case study thus far of the lives of Japanese elderly and of Japanese elder care in comparative perspective. Hashimoto found the commitment to and coverage of public services and funding for the elderly to be fairly similar in Japan and the United States. There is, however, a clear ideological difference reflected in basic legislation like Japan’s 1963 Law for the Welfare of the Aged (1963) and our

²There is a Japanese organization, founded in 1986, that has modeled itself on AARP as a nonprofit mutual benefit association for senior citizens. This is the Chōju Shakai Bunka Kyōkai, which initially adopted the English name “Well Aging Club”; this has been recently changed to the “Wonderful Aging Club.” However with only about 10,000 dues-paying members in the late 1980s, it is a pale imitation of AARP.

³See Ivan Morris’s (1956) English translation as “The Hateful Age.” I prefer Plath’s (1988a, 508) rendition of the title as “the spiteful years.”

Figure 9-1: Japanese cartoon serial satirizing elder care
極楽町一丁目二階堂正宏



(I am indebted to Robert J. Smith for introducing me to this cartoon serial.)

Source: “*ciokuraku-chō ichōme*” by Nikaïdo Masahiro. Published by Shitaba Kai, Tokyo, Japan.

Older Americans Act of 1965, which she characterized as the difference between "the Japanese focus of guarantee and the US emphasis on entitlement to independent life":

The dynamics of the American policy lie in the complexity of the ideology it seeks to embrace. The dilemma lies in the use of age as a criterion of allocating social resources, while at the same time there is a reluctance to consider age as a basis for recognizing social difference. (Hashimoto 1984, 47)

Hashimoto's point is that American policy debates are rooted in considerations of equality and justice, and they therefore touch a deep ambivalence about the need for special treatment and equal treatment. Universalistic conceptions of rights deny natural inequalities—"old" people are not different from "young" people any more than "women" are not different from "men," or "Asian Americans" are not different from "Hispanic Americans." Justice demands equal treatment. At the same time, however, equal treatment requires equal opportunity, and equal opportunity sometimes requires special treatment. Thus, justice demands that the elderly both should and should not receive special treatment.⁴

Contemporary Japan, on the other hand, gives strong support to principles of age-grading and seniority, and this has modified the universalizing thrust of the post-World War II democratic reforms toward a "principle of compartmentalized equality." "Compartmentalized meritocracy in Japan," Hashimoto writes, "accepts the order of natural differences and confines competition to people who are equal within each biological class." (1984, 46) Age, even more than ethnicity or gender, is seen as a fair standard for differential consideration:

Age, unlike gender or race, is not a permanent characteristic attached to a set of people throughout life. Every young person moves on to take his or her turn in old age with time. It is fair because everyone ages. This appeals to the Japanese sense of justice.... Once old people are defined as a special class of people who do not stand on equal footing with the young, the task of old age policy may be a relatively straightforward one of promoting "welfare," rather than "welfare and justice." (Hashimoto 1984, 48-49)

Japan, in short, emphasizes that "...the dignity of the old does not depend on the same conditions as the young, characterized by present activity, current social participation, and the continuing manifestation of independent resourcefulness." (Hashimoto 1984, 51) It is important to note the parallels here with what Norman Daniels elsewhere in this volume describes as a "prudential life-span account of cross-generation justice." Both Japanese public policy and Daniels' principle stand in contrast to the complete-lives egalitarianism of Dennis McKerlie.

⁴This ambivalence is also captured in several of the contributions to Neugarten (1982).

Hashimoto's argument goes some distance in explaining the lack of raucous public debates across the generations in Japan. However, it moves directly from broad legal-philosophical formulations to specific public policies and social practices. In so doing, it short-circuits the particular historical experiences and institutional arrangements by which some values and conceptions ("culture") are given priority and plausibility. A full account would have to treat many such intervening variables, but there is one such historical factor—the moral valence of the current older generation in Japan—and one such institutional pattern—postwar governance by inclusion and coaptation—that deserve mention even in a brief essay.

Modern Japan has a special fascination for typologizing and stereotyping historical "generations."⁵ The focal point of commentary in the postwar decades has been the so-called "Shōwa single-digit" generation—those born in the first nine years of the Shōwa era (that is, 1926-34). This cohort has become a departure and a measure for much of the subsequent generational talk, even more definitively than its rough U.S. equivalent, "the children of the Depression," has defined postwar America age grades. The single-digit Shōwas are the cohort whose childhood and youth spanned the "dark valley" of the Depression and the war; it is the generation that was old enough to have suffered but young enough not have inflicted suffering. It managed the psychological divide and social chaos in the war's aftermath, to become the bedrock of postwar recovery and boom.

In the early postwar decades, the single-digit Shōwas became, in the popular imagination, the "workaholic company men" and the "education mamas," whose selfless efforts on behalf of corporation and children ensured present and future prosperity. Now in their sixties, this generation is graying into Japan's first "mass longevity" elders. They stand at the peak of an age-graded moral cline, by which judgments of the postwar population are often cohort stratified. Commentators wring their hands anxiously over the younger cohorts, among whom they find weakening social commitment and rising personal indulgence.⁶ In short, the moral stature of this particular historical generation is extremely significant in mitigating resentment about escalating costs of an aging society.

A second important factor in understanding the absence of intergenerational justice debates in Japan has been the political and policymaking climate of the postwar decades, including the prestige enjoyed by the national ministerial bureaucracy and the social compact that has underwritten nearly four decades

⁵As David Kertzer shows in this volume and in other publications, the concept of generation is seldom applied precisely and frequently confused with age cohort. The Japanese notion of *sedai* parallels our own American folk confusion. It can refer to generations within a family, to birth cohorts in the national population, and to "historical generations" in public media and popular talk. It is this third sense of the term that is so important in understanding the special status of the present-day older Japanese.

of political rule by the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Postwar Japan is popularly characterized as a solid triumvirate of bureaucrats, LDP politicians, and major corporate leaders passively supported by a pliant and docile electorate, but this is doubly mistaken. The iron triangle is more like an isometric exercise machine (a metaphor I owe to Harvard historian Charles Maier). Diverging ministry plans, party priorities, and corporate interests ensure constant frictions and contradictory pushing and pulling. Moreover, the political support of the electorate for the congeries of factions that make up the LDP has kept the party sensitively attuned to constituent group needs. Many of the welfare initiatives of the 1970s directly addressed the concerns of the elderly (e.g., health care facilities, health insurance, pension reforms), and were instituted to shore up LDP support at a time when it was seriously challenged by opposition parties. Kent Calder has lucidly modeled the dynamic of "crisis and compensation" that underlies the fragile and negotiated political stability of postwar Japan:

Like developments in older policy areas, welfare spending represents another strategic broadening of the LDP's circle of compensation in response to periodic crises of confidence in the conservative political order which wrecked Japan during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. This broadening occurred even though Japan has lacked the strong, institutionalized labor union role in policymaking that helped accelerate welfare spending across Western Europe from the 1930s on. But the distinctive Japanese conservative pre-emption of opposition demands in times of political crisis produced a parallel complex of welfare policies in Japan as well, before budgetary stringency and the waning of crises combined to stimulate their modification. (Calder 1989, 351-352)⁶

The important point here is that whatever the character of politics within the LDP, the policies it has fashioned with national bureaucrats have been responsive to a wide range of groups. Through prolonged, organized agitations farmers, small business people, declining industry workers, regional populations,

⁶For example, the second decade of Shōwa produced the *Shōwa futaketa* (the "two-digit Shōwas," although the term usually refers only to those born from the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s). Reaching middle age in the late 1960s and early 1970s, they have been to many commentators the *mai hōmu-gata*, home-oriented types, who nonetheless retain a commitment to the workplace, if only to secure the status and resources to enable a prosperous home. Of more dubious commitment are the "new family types: (*nyū famiri-gata*), that is, the postwar baby boomers (of 1947-51), who are believed to be primarily concerned about a personal life-style and who lack any direct experience of the hardships prior to high-growth decades. To some commentators and analysts, the decline continued unabated with the children of the 1960s and 1970s (including the second "baby boomlet" of 1971-74). Much was made of the *shirake sedai*, the "reactionless" youth of the 1970s, who, it was despaired, lacked enthusiasm for everything, work and home. More recently, the *shinjinrui*, the "new breed" youth of the 1980s, have been alternately feted and feared for their misplaced, though voracious, consumer appetites. For further discussion, see Kelly (1992).

⁷The most important study of government policy for older Japanese is Campbell's *How Policies Change: The Japanese Government and the Aging Society* (1992).

pollution victims, working women, and others have all secured at least a modicum of benefits. The distribution has not been even, but it has been extensive, and it has gained for the LDP the cooptation of much of the voting population. Policies and benefits targeted for the elderly, then, are part of a larger political pattern that does not render them untouchable (witness the retrenchments of the 1980s), but does keep them from being singled out for controversy and attack.

Thus one must look beyond national character and broad philosophical orientations to interpretations that combine ideology, institutions, and history. Together these factors suggest why there is not, nor is there likely to be in the near term, the kinds of debates that raise the specter of intergenerational conflict. At the same time, we cannot take the absence of this particular debate to mean the absence of any public debates about obligations across generations and the shape of Japan as an aging society. Indeed, these are matters of great concern and considerable diversity of opinion in Japan, and my intent in the second half of this chapter is to introduce four such contentious issues about aging and the elderly in Japan.

Issue 1: Who Are the "Elderly" in an Aging Japanese Society?

As with many societies, historical conceptions of age and aging in Japan were both particular and generic. In the context of a stem family ideal—widespread in Japan since the seventeenth century—positional status defined relative authority. Males (and more uncommonly, females) moved up a ladder of roles—from child to unmarried youth to heir (or heir's spouse) to household head (or household head's spouse) to retirement as exhousehold head (or spouse) (and beyond, as one of the ancestors). The elderly were those who had progressed through the status ladder and were in retirement.

On a more universal level, one of the significant premodern calendars was a conjunction of ten- and twelve-year cycles, yielding folk notions that a sixty-year life was a complete life. The elderly were those who had led a full life, a cylindrical cycle; in their sixties, they could enjoy a second childhood, as it was often phrased. Various factors have undermined these notions, and the issue of who are the elderly in present-day society is one of little agreement and much concern. Retirement, of course, remains one common measure, although it is the workplace rather than the home front which stipulates retirement. And even here, the variation in retirement ages and the widespread practice of beginning a second career or postretirement job for another five to fifteen years has rendered "retired person" a problematical category for Japanese over age fifty-five.

What David Plath (1980) has talked about as "mass longevity" has significantly altered conceptions of the life cycle and its stages. Indeed, "life cycle" (or "life course") is one of several constructs that have gained much ideological

force and sociological significance and have come to frame public debate in postwar Japan (the Japanese terms are adapted from the English, *raifu saikuru* and *raifu kōsu*). These terms gained currency in government circles and in the national media in the mid-1970s, and since then the "life course" has come to both reinforce and crosscut the generation talk mentioned above. "Life course studies" are now a thriving branch of academic research.⁸ More important, the "life course" has become an influential rubric in several areas of political-economic policy as an instrument for regularizing people's thinking about normative behavior and decisions about life planning.

A major reason for the state attention to the "life cycle" by the mid-1970s was its new vision of Japan as an aging society (*kōreika shakai*) and its nightmare of escalating public entitlements. State ministries began increasingly to refer to the "life cycle" in widely circulated reports like the annual White Paper on National Livelihood. In particular, the official discussions came to identify an "eighty-year life span" (*jinsi hachijū-nen*) as a generalized schema for the population. This phrase has recently been popularized as a contemporary counterpart to the retrospectively labeled prewar "fifty-year life span."⁹

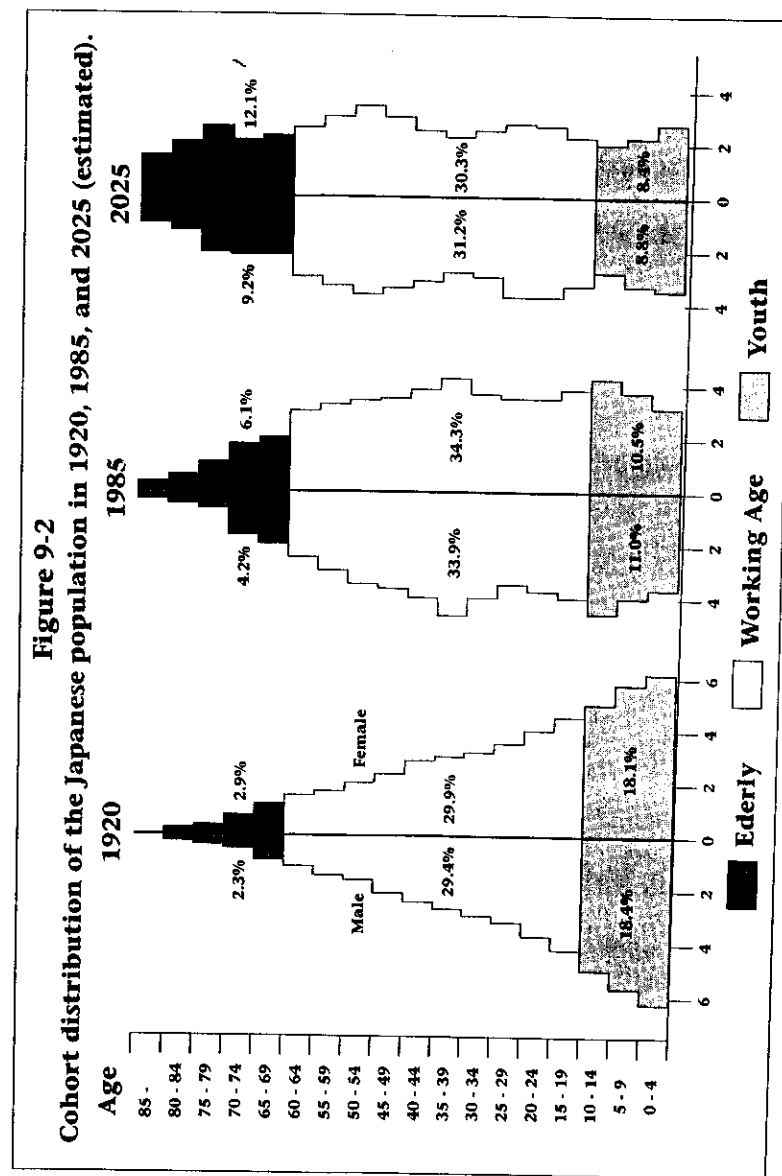
For the Japanese, like the populations of the rest of the industrialized world, living into one's fourth quarter of a century is now the statistical expectation, and much state concern focuses on how to (re)organize the third quarter—as, in fact, the *Shōwa* single-digit generation leads the society toward "mass longevity." As Pifer and Bronte (1986) and others have phrased it for the United States, an earlier population pyramid is becoming an upright rectangle (see Figure 9-2). Thus, the "eighty-year life span" rhetoric also aims to reformulate one's later years as part of national planning for an "aging society" (see Figure 9-3). Government policy initiatives have been designed to encourage a more active and independent old age (e.g., "self-care" programs, Silver Volunteers, etc.), and, for the disabled and the most senior elderly, to promote "home care" and continued privatization of caretaking responsibilities.

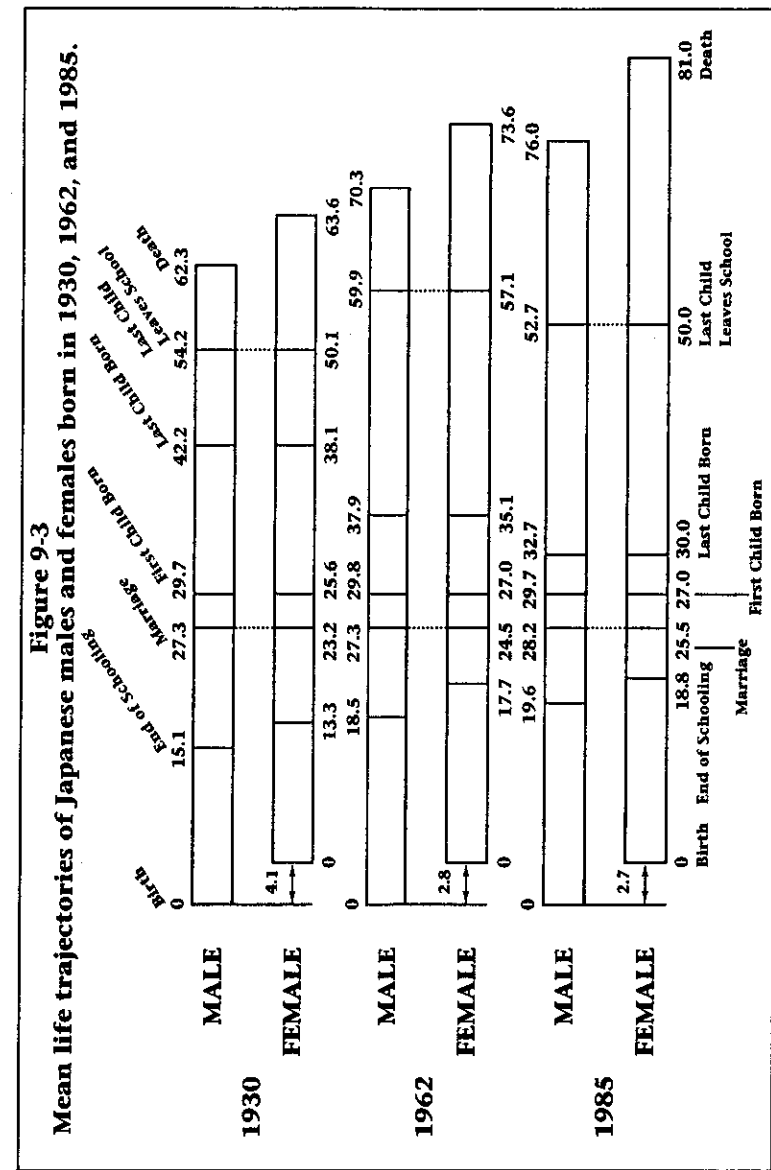
For Japan, talk about an aging society (or *kōreika shakai*) with a normative eighty-year life course began as preemptive rhetoric.¹⁰ This attention to drawing

⁸For a useful review of this Japanese scholarship and its Western referents, see Long (1984).

⁹David W. Plath discusses the public debates on life span in his "The Eighty-Year System" (1988b). A key document in the government's efforts to introduce "life cycle" planning was a 1975 government commission report edited by Yasusuke and Shichi (1975).

¹⁰"Aging society" became an official concern and media topic in mid-1970s, when Japan had youngest population profile of Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nations. It was taking the lead of the United Nations, which had defined an "aging society" as a country in which more than 7 percent of the population was over sixty-five (in 1970, Japan's over-sixty-five cohorts were 7.1 percent). Japan had already promulgated its Law for the Welfare of the Aged in 1963; it decreed 1973 to be Welfare Year One (*Fukushi gannen*), and ten years later, an influential White Paper, the 1983 Annual Report on National Life, proclaimed three megatrends in Japan's immediate future: a maturing economy, an internationalizing polity, and an aging society. Again, see Plath's (1988a) discussion in "The Age of Silver."





out and articulating a model "life span" has if anything increased confusion of just who are the "elderly." The conceptual debates have spawned several linguistic ploys. In a poll by the Hakuhodo Institute of Life and Learning (1987, 179), "urban seniors" overwhelmingly rejected such common terms as *rōjin* (the aged), *kōreisha* (senior citizens), *shirubā jidai* ("silver" citizens), and *otoshiyori* (honorable elders) as terms of reference.¹¹ The only term they preferred was *jukunen*, a new compound meaning roughly "the years of maturity and ripening"! This had been selected from among 300,000 entries in a contest sponsored by the Ministry of Health and Welfare in 1983 to name the lifespan years, 45-65. In tandem with this, many Japanese have borrowed the English usage of "young-old" and "old-old" to discriminate more finely the decades of one's later years.

No doubt this growing ambiguity is common to all advanced industrial societies, where the elderly have become both more independent and more dependent. In Japan as elsewhere, they are both more healthy and more infirm, both better and worse off financially than earlier cohorts. The salience of chronology as a category and the coherence of cohort as an identity are challenged by the multiple trajectories of their members.

Issue 2: Who Is Responsible for One's Later Years?

We have seemingly contrary images of Japanese social attitudes and Japanese state policies toward the elderly. On the one hand, we are impressed that the society highlights certain social norms of respect for elders and feelings of responsibility for their well-being and care. Yet, on the other hand, we tend to believe that the postwar Japanese state provides the least-developed and worst-funded social welfare policies and programs of OECD countries. Rather, Japan has chosen to invest its enormous public resources in industrial growth, feeding the widespread criticism of a "rich Japan, poor Japanese," as a June 1990 CBS documentary put it several years ago.

Perhaps one might resolve this incongruity by referring to the Japanese government's own claim to be creating a "Japanese-style welfare state." By this, it means that private care remains primary and extensive, and public entitlements are merely supplemental and remedial. This offers the possibility of a generous

¹¹ As Plath discusses in "The Age of Silver," the fad for "silver" as a term for senior citizens began in 1973 when Japan National Railways began to install "silver seats" on one of its main lines. The coining of "Englanese" words that sound fashionably foreign and up-to-date is a common practice in Japan. In this case, it offered a new, positively nuanced term in place of older, more laden terms. From silver seats, official talk and media generated a still burgeoning "silver" jargon: silver cards, silver corners (sections of department stores with items and services for the elderly), silver industries, silver sports (especially gateball, a fast and competitive version of croquet), and in-home silver care. In one of its assembly plants, Nissan is now experimenting a "silver line," which is heavily automated to permit recruitment of older workers. Erdman Palmore (1985) used *otoshiyori*, or honorable elders, as the title of his well-known book.

interpretation or a cynical view of a state, willing to offer what is needed to back up obligations sincerely felt and responsibly acted upon by family members.

Still, neither image is entirely accurate. As I have suggested, popular representations of the elderly feature reverence and resentment in equal measure, and Japanese welfare expenditures rose dramatically through the 1970s to higher-than-mean OECD averages. In Japan the most strenuous debates are now not about the levels of public expenditures. Rather they have been joined around issues of social maintenance—of family care versus public elder care facilities like old age homes. What is to be the balance between individual responsibility, family care, community support, and state assistance—in frequency and type (economic, medical, social)? What do forms of care signify to the individual, to his or her family, and to society-at-large in terms of responsibility and dependency?

This, of course, is not unique to Japan. Welfare state growth in the West as well has been marked by the transposition of private matters to public policy. What were once the private relations and negotiations within the family have become national debates about public resources. Entitlement has become less a matter of individual circumstance and more a matter of categorical membership.¹² Still, there are two features that are distinctive about the present Japanese situation. The first is the relatively high rate of employment for Japanese men (and to a lesser extent, women) over age sixty-five, who both want to and have to keep working after mandatory retirement to remain financially independent. The second is the government efforts to promote three-generation families and to privatize elder care. This is statistically borne out: two of three Japanese over age sixty-five live with children (and two-thirds of those households also have their grandchildren), one of four live with their spouse, and only one of ten live alone. Thus, Japanese elderly live with children at four to five times the rate in United States and eight times the rate in Great Britain. Their roles include house caretaker, caring for grandchildren, cooking, housework, laundry, and such.

These two features are seemingly at cross purposes, or perhaps could be better interpreted as the patterns of the young-old and the old-old. That is, the former reflects the need to supplement limited pension income and the desire to remain financially independent of children. The latter reflects the lack of public and private sector long-term care facilities and the legal and ideological presumptions of family responsibility. Together, though, they have kept the burden of responsibility on individual and family means, only backed up by public facil-

¹² For instance, scholars and policy planners in both Japan and the West now talk of a "dependency ration" for their national populations, although its specifications are unclear. Beyond a simple ratio of taxpayers to benefit recipients in national pension schemes, the concept of dependency founders. How dependent? How sudden or how prolonged is the transition from independence to dependence? Can one be both dependent and dependable?

ities and resources. Yet neither independent living nor family care is accomplished easily, and both test the often subtle distinctions between preference and necessity and the varying perspectives of the younger and older generations. The debates that flare up around the "intimate politics of co-residence" (another of Plath's phrases) much more frequently concern social relations than financial abilities.

Issue 3: The Medicalization of "Elderly Problems"

Postwar Japan has been one of the most enthusiastic players in what David Plath once tagged the "Aging Olympics" (Plath 1988a; see also Kiefer 1987). The postwar state took up health care as a legitimate and popular policy aim, and health statistics were given wide publicity in domestic political and international arenas. Much national prestige has been invested in population longevity figures, which became, with gross national product and "middle-class consciousness," one of Japan's three statistical jewels.

Its success bred a familiar dilemma, as attention shifted from acute illnesses, more easily and successfully controlled by advancing medical technology, to more intractable chronic illness. Again, publicity of medical advances, government subsidies of free care, and use of the health system were mutually affirming. After free health care was provided to seniors in 1973, their doctor visits almost immediately doubled, their medical bills increased 300 percent within four years. Even after the very modest limits placed in the mid-1980s, about one-quarter of the hospitalized population is over age seventy, and average hospitalization is much longer than in United States (eighty-eight days versus eleven days).

As in the United States, Japanese officials have called for what Steslicke has termed a "public health" policy that emphasizes preventive care programs, de-institutionalization and home care, and stronger local health care nexuses (rehabilitation programs, recuperative clinics, and in-home public services like Meals-On-Wheels). Kiefer is pessimistic, believing that significant changes in attitudes and institutions are required. The whole notion of health and illness must be reconceived; for example, sickness may be terrifying and tragic in the form of acute illnesses, but that is hardly helpful in cases of more chronic illness. Health care professionals in Japan must rethink their roles as well. The doctor can no longer see himself as a "god" of occasional "heroic intervention," but as a more constant and prosaic manager; nurses for their part must be able to relate better to patients' families. Other professionals like physical therapists must define a more interventionist, directive role than the more traditional caretaker role (Kiefer 1987).

The bedridden (*nettakiri*) are a matter of serious public debate in Japan, but the problem is often a product of the cultural matrix of caring. Stroke is the leading disabling illness, and for this illness especially, prolonged bed rest is highly counterproductive. Yet as Kiefer (1987) astutely describes, the most culturally

rewarding pattern of caretaker-patient is based on active nurturing and helpless passivity, by which the dedicated, stoic caretaker actively makes the dependent patient comfortable. In such a relationship, rehabilitation is difficult because it must often force the patient into uncomfortable, even painful, actions against his or her will.

Issue 4: Gender and Elder Care—Must Women Be the Caregivers?

Even more than in the United States, care for those elderly who cannot care for themselves is overwhelmingly treated as the responsibility of a female relative. Indeed, the major concern of women over age forty in Japan is aging—not their own, but that of their parents, their parents-in-law, and their husband. It is often said that women experience three old ages: in her fifties, she must care for her parents (and/or her spouse's parents); in her sixties and seventies, she must care for her husband; and in her seventies and eighties, she must finally care for herself.

These burdens engender increasingly outspoken frustrations. An official of the Japan Federation of Middle-Aged and Elderly Citizens commented on its emergency telephone hot line service:

The calls we get from wives are predominantly gripes rather than requests for advice. Typical of the endless complaints are "I admired my husband while he was still working. I can't believe he's the same person now. He's always poking his nose into the kitchen and even tries to tell me how to do the tiniest household chores. I didn't realize he was so small-minded. No wonder he didn't get to be an executive. (Natsuki 1981)

These responsibilities have never been easy, and they are only exacerbated by the factors discussed above, including mass longevity, state efforts to keep primary care a family responsibility, and more nuclear households. Moreover, three additional factors have heightened the anger and anxieties of men and women of all generations. One is rising female work-force participation, now well over 50 percent for all married women and some 70 percent for women in their forties. This ensures that a substantial number will face the dilemma of Akiko, the young middle-aged woman in *The Twilight Years* (Ariyoshi 1984), one of postwar Japan's best-selling novels.¹³ Akiko was pressured by her family to quit her legal secretary position to care for her father-in-law when he became senile. She remains a symbol in the popular imagination for the onerous responsibilities of caretaking that fall almost entirely on women.

A second trend is the rising age of marriage. Of women between twenty and twenty-four years old, 85 percent remained unmarried as of 1990, compared

with the corresponding figure of 69.2 percent in 1975. In 1990 40.2 percent of women between twenty-five and thirty were unmarried—almost twice the figure of 20.9 percent in 1975. Although it is difficult to assess the causes, most commentators attribute this to many women's increasing desire to delay marriage (see, for example, Iwao 1992). The third related phenomenon is the declining birth rate, which fell to 1.53 in 1989 and prompted much chauvinistic hand-wringing by (male) bureaucrats about female obligations and maternal urges.

There are several reasons commonly cited for these quite consequential changes. Among the most frequently mentioned, though, is women's concern about elder care and the unpleasant choices with which married women can expect to be confronted in late middle age. In *The Twilight Years*, Akiko accepts her caretaking with doleful resignation, and by the novel's end, expresses satisfaction with the nurturing role she played in her father-in-law's last days. Twenty years later, she remains a sympathetic figure, but skepticism about such quiet resignation is strong among younger women.

In short, for Japan as a self-designated aging society, the increasingly public tensions between the genders are of much greater potential significance than those between the generations. Japan has far larger and more assertive women's organizations than national associations for (or against, as with AGE) older citizens. It is likely that future public policies and programs for older Japanese must accommodate the private choices that individual women are now making about marriage and children as much as the policies must reflect the needs of the burgeoning population of older Japanese themselves.

¹³The original Japanese novel, *Kōkotsu no hito*, appeared in 1972 and remains in print.