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## A Spirit of Adventure in Retirement: Japanese Baby Boomers and the Ethos of Interdependence

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### Abstract

Self-reliance has arisen as a key ethic in relation to older persons in Japan. One part of a larger social trend affecting mature societies around the world is the rising emphasis on elders overcoming dependence in favor of a new ethic of independence. This analysis of older persons in Japan opens a window into the gender dynamics of older-person households, and into the discourses about the lack of an independent autonomous identity in old age aside from that in the workplace. Drawing on fieldwork with retirees, I illuminate retired couples' experiences of and attitudes about retirement, considering the interpersonal dimensions of interdependence and the ways the ethos of self-reliance influences retirees' lives. In particular, I analyse how the men seek to embody interdependence in relationships with their wives. How do they adjust in relation to their wives' expectations, and how do they—and their identities—change after they leave the workforce? Central to this process is an expansion in men's acts of thoughtfulness in relation to their wives.

*Keywords:* Japan, retirement, self-reliance, autonomy, interdependence, responsibility, gender, culture

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# A Spirit of Adventure in Retirement: Japanese Baby Boomers and the Ethos of Interdependence

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## Introduction

In a radio interview on NHK, Japan's national broadcasting service, a market researcher, Tsuchinaga Toshihiko, spoke with the NHK anchorman, Noguchi Hiroyasu, about the retirement of Japan's Dankai no Sedai (baby boomer generation), those born between 1946 and 1950 (Noguchi 2005). As they discussed the lives of retired salaried workers and their wives, Tsuchinaga said, 'If you compare retirement with getting off a train, the wives stepped off their train ten years ago when they finished childrearing. They've since made friends, been on trips, taken lessons to increase their cultural knowledge, and some have even opened their own businesses. Women today are very versatile and independent... In contrast, male retirees ...have simply worked. They have constantly acted on behalf of corporations, but they don't know how to do things for themselves.'

Then Tsuchinaga spoke directly to the male Baby Boomers listening to the program: 'Retirees out there, please remember, when creating your post-retirement life, a spirit of adventure is what matters! (bōken no kokoro de yarimashō!) It can even be fun to learn cooking in a class, if you do it with the right attitude!'

This narrative about retirement appeared regularly in the Japanese media when I was doing my fieldwork. In it, a central trope is the capable, self-reliant wife. She leads a versatile life filled with hobbies, self-cultivation activities and new ventures. She is enterprising, swift, and responsive. The other, and contrasting, central trope is of the retired Baby Boomer husband (salaryman), now in his mid-60s, a lifelong company man who does not know how to construct his own lifestyle in retirement. He is at a loss without the structure provided by his job and company. He found comfort in his job, though he may have felt shackled by it. What is his next move?

Research into many cultures acknowledges that, for married couples, retirement brings enormous adjustment and transition (Gradman 1994 104-107; Lynch and Danely 2013). The literature on ageing clearly documents the strain on mental health for older couples of spending much more time together. They must find a new balance between togetherness and separateness. Married women can experience mental strain when the husband is home more often (Oda 2009). The incidence of mature-age divorce (jukunen rikon) has signaled that couples sometimes part ways once the husbands get their retirement pensions (Alexy 2007). I open this paper asking whether dedication to work is a liability for men. This question has vexed writers for some time.

The gift of mass longevity raises questions about how people configure their later life-course (Plath 1980). In the 1980s, David Plath speculated that mass longevity would augur the birth of the 4-generation ie (family), whether or not the generations lived under the same roof, and the attendant family interactions and obligations. Consociates, that is, friends, lovers, kinswomen and colleagues, empaneled to be a special jury to examine and confirm the course of one's growth and becoming (1980:8)

would emerge to comment on the development of the person.<sup>1</sup> Today in Japan, the 4-generation family has emerged due to the rise in the number of centenarians, but the number of multi-generational households has fallen. The single-person household is most prevalent (Mackie 2014: 217). In 1980, 70% of senior citizens lived with their children, 18% with their spouses, and 4% alone, but by 2010, the relative figures were 42%, 40%, and 5%. In urban areas, more older persons live in couple-only households, making those relationships important to the experience of later life. Furthermore, women are outliving men. As Leonie Stickland notes, the issue of ageing alone happily, healthily, and actively is one of great interest and concern for partnerless older Japanese women, whether widowed, divorced, or lifetime singles (Stickland 2015:36).<sup>2</sup>

The concept of productive ageing explains how older persons can remain involved in and contribute to society. Rejecting the theory that disengagement from social life is a necessary aspect of ageing, productive ageing advocates seek to identify social participation opportunities for elders (Hughes and Heycox 2010:76). American gerontologist, Richard Butler, originated the term in the 1980s and says the concept extends well beyond formal work: Even a bedridden person can be 'productive' and 'helpful to caregivers'. The key principle of productive ageing is to remain constructive in the larger society and immediate environment for as long as possible (Butler in ILC 2011: 68). This approach has long existed in Japan, where a retiree's productive activity continued in a modified role after retirement. This may explain why the number of seniors working in Japan is the highest in the world. As OECD data show, in Japan, 76% of people over age 60 continue to be in employment (OECD 2016). In nearly 90% of cases, people aged 65 and over are rehired into new jobs, experiencing a 50-70% reduction in their salaries from before they retired (Bungei Shunju 2006: 104). Far more elders are employed in Japan than in France and Germany. 77.5% of companies hired seniors age 65 and above (JILPT 2016:49). Similarly, the Human Capital Index quantifies how countries are developing and deploying their human capital. Among 124 countries, Japan ranks No. 5, but No. 1 for people 65 and over (World Economic Forum 2017).<sup>3</sup>

The ethos of productive ageing has shaped other societies with ageing populations such as the United States (Lamb 2013; Dumit 2012). This notion points to a broadened meaning of health among older persons and reflects the increased longevity and affluence of populations in the industrialised world. Health care industry activities have expanded in recent years to encompass more than managing chronic disease and terminal illness and now include the enhancement of life and health. Mature citizens in Japan and other industrialised nations are encouraged to consume their way to wellness by striving to forestall the effects of biological ageing.

In the rest of this paper, I explore the search for a valuable retirement among white-collar workers. I argue that it is expected that a person contribute meaningfully to others' lives. For salarymen, it requires shifting from being a provider to being a fellow traveler in life. As Emma Cook argues, masculinity is linked to labour, family, and particular types of responsibility (2016:3). Postwar ideas of manhood positioned men as hard workers, breadwinners, and heads of households (*daikokubashira*) responsible for families. With retirement, the nature of responsibility shifts. My thesis is that to be thoughtful toward the other is to be responsible toward the other, and to be responsible toward the other is to practice interdependence. All of this, moreover, is encapsulated in activities that the state labels as exercising independence in Japan. I argue that the retirees' search for meaningful hobbies and the self they engage in reflect more than simply the trend toward being productive; they also wish to embody independence in later life, and to have good marital relations in retirement. For older persons, it is important to find a social purpose after retirement, to have a meaningful channel of social contact with

people other than one's immediate kin, and to continue to work (Traphagan 2006).

What follows is a discussion of how retirees adjust to retirement. I focus on the experiences of men who built their careers in a historical era where attachment to the corporation was valued. I analyse how they seek to embody independence in relationships with their wives. I explore the agency of the everyday: the ways in which men and women engage in practices of mutual aid, self-care and self-reliance. A second focus is thoughtfulness. My ethnographic findings show that indeed men are able to adjust in retirement. Though media portrayals claim they cannot, I later provide micro sociological examples of men exercising thoughtfulness toward their wives in the years following retirement. I show how their efforts to be considerate of the other, and to minimize dependence, become intertwined. Thus I contribute to the scholarship about productive ageing written in terms of the local idiom of *ikigai* (that which makes life worth living) in old age (Mathews 2003; Hashimoto 2000). To that discussion I contribute insights into the expansion of thoughtfulness that is involved in negotiating new life transitions. I show how elders remain in constructive relationships by being considerate, collaborative, and mindful about managing dependence. The crux, then, is to remain in constructive relationship: to be in relationship without being a burden (see Traphagan 2006). First, however, I provide background on two values that prevail in the lives of senior citizens. Other important issues that are not addressed in the paper include intergenerational family dependence relationships with grandchildren. Although each of the men studied had grandchildren, I have decided to focus on their marital relationships because childrearing was not a central part of their adult lives.

### **Urgency of the Ethos of Self-reliance**

The expectation that elders participate in society stems from a rising ethos of self-reliance (*jiritsu*) in Japan and other Asian countries. Writing about urban China, Anna Boermel (2010) asserts that finding a "new, dependable structure after retirement" is central to leading a meaningful and fulfilling life at an advanced age. There are many forms of

self-reliance, for example, financial, physical, and emotional. Given how central the concept of self-reliance is to this article, I provide a short history and definition of the concept. It becomes clear that elders have long aspired to the ideal. Self-reliance involved social withdrawal and isolation; one transcended attachment to earthly realms and to the everyday world. The ideal has strong affinities to the Buddhist concept of non-attachment and world renouncement (Scheid 1997: 97). More recently, the self-reliance debate for elders has involved not being so dependent on others that one becomes a nuisance to them.

I asked a retired salaried worker, Satsumi, what she thought about the state's discourse about independence. Smiling a bit she said, she felt it was a slogan the government introduces to cut costs. Of course, she said, all people want to be independent. And it would be ideal if the government introduced programs to support elders to stay independent. But she felt that the discourse of independence was driven by a wish to cut costs. She also said there might be people who don't want to be independent. What is clear is that the discourse on the moral value or benefits of not being overly dependent has permeated the lives of citizens in Japan, influencing their decisions to live in ways that are both creative and responsible and hence place little burden on the smooth functioning of family and society. For elders in Japan, independence extends beyond taking responsibility for physical wellbeing to, in some cases, trying not to rely on people, including children. I discovered that elders are being taught to believe it is an act of consideration toward their younger kin to avoid being overly dependent on them. This perception that being overly reliant is problematic is quite pronounced in Japanese society. Historically, parent-child relations were constructed such that elders would return to their second childhood after

reaching 60 and could legitimately depend on their adult children for their care. Today, a person who draws clearer boundaries between parent and child is praised. Taking initiative in finding a nursing home or at least accepting to go into a nursing home, taking initiative in taking care of one's belongings without leave them for family to sort out, and being responsible for progressing health goals all come under the umbrella of self-reliance. The counter-example is someone who depends on others to amend situations and find solutions.

As the Japanese live longer and family formation patterns have shifted, living arrangements for senior citizens have also changed. Far more people over 65 are living in couple-only households or on their own. In surveys, older persons state that they prefer to live alone rather than with their children (Kurokawa and Campbell 2016), and that they prefer to engage the assistance of care robots rather than rely unduly on their children or on migrant carers (Robertson 2014). The longevity and wellbeing of older men and women is raised in advice columns in popular magazines, and in other sites of public culture. This is the context in which older persons are enjoined to live creatively and sustain well-being.

## Responsibility

More recently, the idea of economic self-reliance has been discussed in deregulating neoliberal economies (Seike 2015). This is especially relevant in Japan, as its social security system shoulders large payments to elders for health insurance and pensions. The aging of the population, coupled with the low birthrate, has increased the number of retirees per capita—and the pressures on the social security system. Cook describes a veritable moral panic about what young people are doing—or not doing—with their lives by not reproducing children to support the social security system (2016:6). The young men Cook analysed in her ethnography sought to create meaningful individualised lifestyles and to pursue aspirations according to their own values, which included work that was individually meaningful. Following Cook, I argue that men negotiate new masculine roles as they move through the life-course (*ibid*). For retirees, likewise, finding a source of meaning in retirement has been very important.

The concept of responsibility (*sekinin*) has emerged as related to self-reliance. Norms of personal responsibility and self-reliance suffuse contemporary Japanese commentaries on personhood, which historically has been understood as embedded in social relationships. A person is constituted through her relationships with others. Here I turn to the seminal work of historian Carol Gluck who, casting a gaze over the late 20th-century usage of the term *sekinin*/responsibility, notes that in Japan in around 2000 and elsewhere, responsibility became a ubiquitous term, manifesting in phrases such as corporate, social, and environmental responsibility, as well as product responsibility (liability). Though the term *sekinin* was used variously, its meaning held a clearly distinguishable valence: [r]ather than responsibility of office, role, or the individual, it was responsibility toward rather than for something (2009:101, italics in original). Responsibility for the self was being reoriented toward the individual. For example, medical responsibility meant that physicians were required to tell patients the truth about their illness. Responsibility was more often understood as accountability: public institutions were responsible to explain their actions to the people. And individual patients were gradually seen as being more responsible for their own well-being. At the same time, the notion of responsibility became less anchored in a sense of belonging to a community or vocation. As people became less concerned with discharging the obligations associated with such a status, the notion that arose was of responsibility anchored in principles of the person belonging to society, and thus being an accountable self.

What developed, in other words, was a heightened emphasis on the responsibility that individuals and institutions have to embody. People were enjoined to be choice-making, self-regulating members of a society. Patients were held responsible for some of their diseases; by redefining diabetes as a lifestyle disease (*seikatsu shukan byô*), the medical establishment could make patients with adult-onset diabetes responsible for their disease. Men who were let go from their jobs were told they were responsible for having chosen to work for those companies in the first place (Gluck 2009:103). And following the Big Bang of financial deregulation in 1998, investors were told they were responsible for their investment choices. The 1990s was a time, then, when the state told people that they were responsible for all the actions they took, and the resulting outcomes.

Hence, the notion of responsibility in the office or position was not eroded completely, but it was joined by the new subjective feeling of responsibility associated with the modern self, and the notion of responsibility outward toward society. The support of strong individuals (*tsuyoi kojîn*) was introduced by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi (2001-2005), and it was subsequently passed on to the Shinzo Abe Cabinet (2006-2007; 2012-2017). The value was self-responsibility in the name of greater freedom. Does this indicate a rise in the idea of the individual accountable for the self in society, and a gradual decline in the notion of individuals embedded in, and thus able to depend on, members of the community for their own wellbeing? I would argue that interdependence remains vitally important in Japan. However, this is not to deny the importance of elders taking more initiative for their own wellbeing. The act of seeking help from others is seen as something to be actively avoided for as long as possible. Reaching out for help has a new meaning of risk: that the elder is in danger of needing nursing care. Local governments have promoted volunteering, as a means of ensuring that the senior population remains active (Nakano 2009). They consider senior citizens' participation volunteering work an important factor in reducing the risk of ill health associated with sedentary lifestyles in old age, and indirectly reducing the burden on the long-term care and national health insurance systems. By framing social participation in the language of individual initiative (*jihatsuteki ishi*), these governments are asking individuals to be proactive in constructing their retirement not only to remain healthy in later life but also to help shoulder the burden of an ageing society.

Overall, the twin values of self-reliance and responsibility have become a powerful prism for exploring shifting attitudes about old age, which emphasise living in a sustainable and hence responsible fashion.

## Discourses about Men's Self-Reliance in Retirement

The sources of men's dependence on women have occupied thinkers for some time. Two theorists offer analyses that are relevant to my discussion of the retirees.

Taga Futoshi (2006: 154-158) observes a shift in men's sense of self upon retirement. Their sense of self as a husband who is in a relationship with a wife, as opposed to a husband as a breadwinner, becomes amplified in retirement, as husbands lose other aspects of their identity as employees. Without those other aspects of their identity, men can become more fixated on the couple relationship than before. They may assert their authority as husbands in the household to compensate for its loss in other domains.

Tanaka Toshiyuki (2009) sees another source of difficulty in retirement: men become isolated from local social networks, and generally have fewer local networks than women. Communication with

their wives becomes more important to them. They turn to their wives for companionship but women claim they have little to talk about together.

I opened this paper by asking whether dedication to work is a liability. Specifically, does it encroach on interdependence? The sociologist Amano Masako (1998;80), a strong advocate of balancing autonomy and interdependence, particularly among middle-aged and older couples, Amano (1998:80) problematizes men's self-reliance, or lack thereof, by saying the man only knows his corporate role and relies on his educational qualifications and work achievements to provide a source of identity and meaning. Such a person does not show self-reliance even if he is financially independent because he defines his sense of self using criteria provided by corporations, e.g. his success in reaching the company's sales goals. He is at risk of depending on his wife to have a "life" beyond work. Amano says men need to develop their lives in three domains: of the self, community, and the family. These domains correspond to the sources of men's dependence on women as identified by Taga: over-identification with their careers, their limited household skills, and isolation from community networks. With the self, Amano encourages men to develop a source of personal worth as a human being independently of their job tasks. For the community, it is to have local networks of friends, and neighbors. With the family, it is to contribute equally to household responsibilities, which include housework and childcare. All of these actions, especially relying less on their identity as a worker, contribute to men's independence. Yamato Reiko (1996: 361) discovered that the more men take part in community activities while they are still working, the smoother their transition out of a work-focused identity.

In her more recent analyses of elder dependence, Amano (2014) articulates a new view. She summarizes some of the key findings from her in-depth study of Japanese films dealing with the subject of older persons. To demand independence of older persons, she says, is to impose upon them the expectations of the strong; more important are sensitivity and imagination about ageing. In other words, she is encouraging people to rely on each other, rather than pursue complete self-reliance.

Lamb (2013: 176) also argues that to become dependent in late life and to receive *seva* – respectful service and care - is not a failure in personhood, but an appropriate, normal, and valued part of the life course. Lamb, analysing how her Indian informants approached the ageing process, states that Americans may learn from them and begin to incorporate visions of appropriate dependence and meaningful decline into understandings of successful ageing (2013;185). She also sees value in developing visions of human interdependency and not seeing decline as failure. Not all forms of debility signal a failure to age well. I now turn to the analysis of my research with retirees.

## Methodology

I have carried out fieldwork in Japan on ageing during the past fourteen years, concentrating on urban-dwelling elders. In this article, I offer insights from interviews I conducted with retirees in Saitama Japan. The interviews touch on the issues of dependence and relationships in retirement. After retirement, the retirees had joined an English conversation class in the public citizens' hall in Saitama City, where I volunteered as an assistant instructor for eighteen months. My retiree informants come from diverse educational backgrounds and professions. They ranged in age from 60 to 75, and all have considered themselves suitable participants in a study of retirement and formal lifelong learning in classes (such as language and theatre classes), as well as informal circles such as hiking and walking. The interviews focus on their experience of ageing; attitudes to living a meaningful life as they grow older; daily life practices and social relations; and retirement experiences. I take a narrative analysis approach

in analysing taped and transcribed interviews and fieldwork notes. My research examines the emotions and affects that people experience when they transition into retirement. This article focuses primarily on men who retired from full-time career jobs, rather than self-employed men.

The men I came to know entered the workforce in the 1960s and retired after 2000. They belong to a generation of men who worked extremely long hours and took few holidays. The Japanese style of management required hard work, a great deal of unpaid overtime without pay and deference to immediate superiors. Few of the men could remember eating dinner with their families except occasionally on Sundays. Anne Allison (1994: 21-29) vividly captures the ways in which corporate entertainment can absorb workers' time and affect, expanding the realm of work both temporally and spatially; in the process, the distinctions between work and play become blurred and the family recedes into the background. One salaryman I interviewed described this life:

To tell you the truth, there was a part of me that was working because I really enjoyed it... The entertaining was crazy (*mucha kucha*) but great. I'd come home in the company car about 12 or 1 every morning. When I got home I'd plop down on the futon and sleep. I'd wake up later that morning and go right back to work.

The salaryman who dedicated all his waking hours to work ended up spending little time at home with his family, but my informants considered this model of fatherhood to be normal. Within this model of masculinity, which gave primacy to work, ties with children were neglected and they became accustomed to an absentee father. Men poured their energies into work rather than their community networks. Their sense of reward as husbands and fathers came from their financial support for their families, and as social beings from the camaraderie they enjoyed with their colleagues.

## Personal Stories of Three Retirees

I now explore the subjectivities of three retirees, looking at how they negotiated shared domestic life with their wives, and what they expected after retirement. I focus in depth on a man I will call Hayashi Kenji whom I came to know well during my fieldwork, interviewing both him and his wife on a multiple occasions. I also look at two other retirees, Murase Makoto and Kondo Takashi.

### *Murase Makoto*

Mr. Murase is 64 and lives with his wife, their second daughter, and her family. On finishing high school he began to work for a small firm in Saitama, and eventually became president. Over lunch one day, I asked him to explain his transition to retirement:

For about three months after I retired, I was lying around at home. I felt satisfied that I had fulfilled my duty as a man, having worked for nearly 40 years. But then I began to think I had to do something.

He went on to explain how a new schedule gradually unfolded around learning activities: This was just part of it:



On Sundays I go to dance class, Mondays to golf lessons, Wednesdays to English language class... On Tuesdays and Thursdays I play golf with my elementary school friends.

The people he had met at the English conversation class had not become close friends, but they did serve a key purpose for him:

You see how at the English class most of the people come dressed up? They don't show up in the gear they had on at home. It means they're trying to present a nice appearance to the opposite sex. I had the choice of joining another English class where all the students were men in their 60s and 70s, but I chose this one because of the mix of men and women. When people stop caring about how the opposite sex sees them, it's the true mark of aging.

For Makoto, mingling with women motivated him, and some other classmates, to consider the interests of others when selecting clothes to wear to class. Leaving the house regularly gave him scope for freedom in being whom he wishes. He felt that having interactions with others helped guard against the onset of dementia. At home, he was respectful of the kitchen as his wife's space, and rarely entered it.

### *Hayashi Kenji*

Another member of the English language class, whom I call Mr. Hayashi, was 67 when I interviewed him, and had worked as an architect for a large construction firm for nearly 40 years. He lived in a single-generation household. One spring day he invited me to his home to meet his wife, Keiko, knowing I was interested in the impact retirement had on other members of a retiree's household. As I chatted with Keiko in the Hayashis' living room, I remarked to her that Kenji was a very conscientious participant in the language class. She replied:

Before he retired, I encouraged him to get to know people in our local community; I knew it would be hard for him to keep in touch with his colleagues from the company. I think it's very good for him to be going to these classes rather than stay at home all the time. When he goes out he gets stimulation and learns things he didn't know before.

In contrast to Makoto, Kenji enrolled in class a few weeks after he retired. But there is more to the comparison than their different degrees of initiative in seeking out learning opportunities: their home environments also helped shape their movement into the world outside the home. While both men described going to class as a good way to meet people, Makoto described home as a place where he is made to feel at home by a wife who loves to cook for family members. Makoto had entered his wife's family as an adopted son (*muko yōshi*) and had worked for the family firm; hence he had a different schedule from the other two men, and more autonomy in managing his work-life balance. He could be more significantly involved in his children's lives than Kenji and Mr. Kondo, as they both worked for large corporations that dictated their working hours. "My wife likes it that I go out and do things, but she also likes me to be at home." I asked Makoto if he did any housework:

Oh no. Home is my wife's domain. She won't let me into the kitchen, except to get beer out of the refrigerator. My daughters claim my wife rules my life and it's probably true that I live in the palm of her hand. My situation is like being on a piece of flat land surrounded by mountains. If I go too far in any direction, I hit a wall. Even when I'm traveling on a golfing trip, I realize that I haven't left my wife.

Mrs. Murase, who enjoyed doting on her husband when he was at home, was quite different from Keiko. Keiko had no wish to do so: Kenji said Keiko preferred he be out of the house. Several times during the months I knew Kenji I had heard him state quite emphatically that he was making an effort to not disturb his wife's life rhythm. When I met with Keiko, she noted that when he retired one of the hardest things for her was that suddenly there were two of them in the house. She said,

It's probably true of many salaryman households where husbands leave early in the morning and come home late at night, but the woman is at home like the lord of her palace. This goes on for decades. Then suddenly, it's as if somebody begins to invade this space.

Keiko's eyes narrowed as she said this.

For a moment, the interview setting became tense, and Kenji intervened, with a smile: "There's this troublesome presence in your midst now, isn't there? It's become totally different." Keiko broke into a laugh and replied, "You make it sound harsh! But yes, having to share this space has been rather trying. It's that I get distracted." She went on to say that she could no longer concentrate on her painting and reading at home if he was there.

Kenji initially perceived the home as a space of creative relaxation. He expected he could pursue hobbies he had previously only dreamed about pursuing. Keiko's expectation that he leave the home regularly so that she could keep her 'peace' led him to revise his perception of home away from relaxation to a place which had a rhythm and life style he needed to respect. His wife's organization of her home life impacted how he devised a schedule.

Kenji's entry into centers of learning fulfilled a range of functions; among them, acquiring new knowledge and skills, and creating social links with neighbours. It also enabled Keiko to retain the space of the home as hers for significant portions of the day. Retirement forced the two to negotiate the use of the space in their home, and he responded by developing new pursuits outside.

### *Kondo Toshi*

The third retiree, Toshi Kondo, like Makoto joined the English language class a few months after he retired. Toshi was 61 and lived with his wife and wife's frail mother who was in her 90s and cared for by Mrs. Kondo. The Kondos had two children in their with their own homes. I asked Toshi whether his corporation had helped him make the transition into retirement. He brushed the question off, stating, "I'm very cool about things like that. I think it's up to the individual." Although his firm had just begun to offer such guidance and services, he did not make use of them. Toshi dismissed the idea of using any services offered to help men adjust to retirement. "I knew others who did, but I am not a nureochiba (wet fallen leaves)." Takashi's pride demanded that he show he was unperturbed and in charge even when in most need of support. Toshi's tone of voice suggested that only people without shame would seek such help after retirement. The citizens' hall was a palatable source of social support where he could reconstitute himself without turning to his old employer for help.

As we talked after class one day, Toshi described himself as a typical salaryman:

There was never a day I returned home from work before 10 pm. On weekends I would go on golfing trips with clients of my company. For six years, I lived as a tanshin funin [in a posting apart from his family] in southern Japan. Men of my generation – we were workaholics.

Toshi claimed with pride that he had no regrets about a lifestyle that had been devoted to work. The only problem was that late nights and living as a bachelor led to health troubles, namely high blood pressure and obesity: “I had a heart attack at 58. That’s why I took early retirement at 59.”

Toshi noted that the transition to retired life was easy at first: regaining his health became an all-consuming concern.

I went walking every day to lose weight. About 9 months later, my health indicators were great. But my wife was not so happy about my retirement. She said she was sick of having to look at my face every day.

I asked Toshi about the source of his wife’s irritation: did he wish she would cook three meals a day for him? I had heard women members of the English class grumble about having to do so. No, he said, “I learned to cook during my six years of living on my own. These days I get my own breakfast and lunch, and I clean up after my wife cooks. It’s not that.” He continued,

Since our kids entered university, my wife has been an active member of the local tennis club. She’s formed a social life around the club and spends a lot of her time training. She likes for me to be active as well. I didn’t think I was being a burden (*meiwaku*) on anyone, but my wife became frustrated when I suggested we spend more time together after I retired.

It was actually the Kondos’ daughter who sought to remedy the situation between her parents and suggested that her father attend a class:

That’s how I began to take Chinese language classes about nine months after my retirement. Six months after that I joined the English class. At \$20 per month, they’re much more affordable than going out drinking or playing golf, he said, somewhat ruefully.

I sensed he would have liked to have saved up more money for his retirement. In a follow-up interview, I met with Toshi again. He told me he invited his wife to go to a hot springs resort; this was the Kondos’ first trip as a couple in the 18 months since he had retired. He said,

My wife was concerned that I would break her rhythm. She was concerned I would ask her to take care of me. But I’m keeping up my walking, and she’s keeping up her tennis life, and she’s very happy.

He added:

These days, I wake up earlier and earlier. I get up around 5 and have my breakfast by 6. I get my own breakfast, so I don’t put any burden on her for getting meals. I get my own lunch. I help clean up in the kitchen. I now help with preparing food and cleaning up. I don’t expect my wife to cook me three meals a day. He had also developed an interest in the nearby city of Kamakura, and went there about once a month to visit friends. In the past year he had read about 20 books on Kamakura; he took particular interest in its history before the Heian period around the time of the life of Buddhist scholar, Shotoku Taishi.

### *Women's Self-Reliance*

I remembered Kenji saying that he was trying not to disturb his wife's life rhythm, but it was Toshi's comments that brought them into high relief. "After I stopped working I thought it would be nice to spend time with my wife, but she said she didn't want to change her schedule to accommodate my retirement."

The theme of women's angst about having their schedules disrupted emerges in the popular press. It is encapsulated in the words of a woman in her late 50s who eyes her husband's impending retirement with considerable gloom:

I want to continue all my learning activities but I worry that my husband will demand I change my schedule. He'll ask, 'When are you coming home? When's dinner?' It will drive me nuts. Even now, whenever my husband is in the house, I can't conduct life at my own pace...With his retirement, I'm afraid it will disturb my use of my time (Nakamura and Inokuma 2005:23).

Schedules provide a sense of comfort and continuity, a roadmap as to where people will go, and what activities they will pursue (Dillard 2013). Dillard writes that schedules provide a sense of order in a shifting world. To have such schedules disrupted is a problem. Some women are in ambivalent relationships with their husbands in the domestic domain. Some resist men's expectations that they will put aside their own interests to attend to them. While many women may wish to be a good wife and friend to their husbands, they increasingly value their autonomy to design their life as they would like.

### *Hayashi Keiko*

I saw these issues in action one day when Kenji invited me to meet his wife, Keiko, without him. I interviewed her in their living room, and she explained her experience of her husband's retirement:

I got used to being on my own. He was never home early in any case. He was out drinking with his colleagues after work rather than working in the office. So women like me did everything by ourselves and took care of the children by ourselves.

Pausing a moment, she added, 'I learned self-reliance (*jiritsu*). I don't mean isolation (*koritsu*), I mean self-reliance.' As she emphasized this distinction, I heard a certain confidence in her voice, based on her experience. Perhaps she was proud that she had turned isolation and aloneness into a source of strength, transforming it into independence. This involved developing skills in creating networks with other mothers and members of the local community. Most importantly, it involved having an independent opinion. As she used the word *jiritsu*, I could see that she situated it less in a paradigm of active ageing or retirement, but rather in a longer genealogy of growing as an artist, mother and housewife who was responsible for singlehandedly raising their children while the husband was at work. She had cultivated her own opinion and own way of life. For her, self-reliance was not a new phenomenon.

Gender sociologist Taga Futoshi (2005) argues that wives, regardless of whether or not they work outside the house, are equipped with skills in running a household. This is because of responsibilities entrusted to women in line with gender expectations that prevailed in their life course. As their children needed less of their time, women were catapulted into a period of soul-searching and then adopting new pursuits. They sensed that they had finally earned the right to put themselves first.

Women frequently refer to this process as creating a world of one's own (*jibun jishin no sekai o tsukuru*). The word *sekai* can be interpreted in multiple ways as a world of hobbies, learning, volunteering, or part-time work; these new activities invariably involve a new set of human connections. This world is often marked as distinct from family and home.

Creating a world of one's own has interesting parallels with men's experience of retirement in that both involve a process of establishing a new identity.

## Loss in Retirement

### *Hayashi Kenji*

Some elders such as Kenji experienced the discourse of developing responsibility in later life to be prescriptive. On another day, I interviewed Kenji on his own. Over a bowl of ramen noodles that he had prepared, Kenji and I spoke about his life. I asked him how his career had interfaced with his family life.

I saw my role was to work and earn money to support a household. I saw my wife's role was to take that income and raise the children and do the housework. Keiko did all of the childrearing. That's what I thought married life was: a division of labor. In any event, I was too busy with my work to think about my kids; 100% of my self-identity revolved around work.

By providing for his family, he saw himself "guarding the house" albeit in a subordinate role (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012:xxiv). When Kenji retired, he said, he tried to come up with activities he could engage in with Keiko. He invited her on trips to thank her for their many years of marriage. He was surprised when she said no.

He resolved instead to pursue his hobbies at home. During his entire working life, he had been so busy that he rarely had time to enjoy hobbies he had developed as a teenager, such as building miniature trains and creating maps. But he confronted another obstacle: Keiko had become so accustomed to having the house to herself that she was irritated at his company.

Kenji sighed, as if this weighed heavily on him. Home was not a comfortable space for him to settle into. He began to set up his schedule in a way that let him leave the house regularly. This was the best favour he could do for his wife, he said, a bit despondently: to be out of the house as often as possible.

Kenji got up from the table where we had been eating lunch and walked to a calendar on the far wall where he and Keiko kept a record of when they would be out of the house. He talked about their situation:

I know people who still cram their schedules even after they've retired. They're obsessed with filling up their days. It's called the datebook syndrome. When I meet them they say I'm busy, I'm busy. I think they're afraid they will fade out of existence if they don't participate in all these activities. So long as they have a place to go – to teach here, take painting there, or do haiku – they seem satisfied. I wonder WHY? You're finally retired! Why do you pack your schedule like that?

The mild-mannered man retorted, with feeling, "It's the first time we are liberated from a busyness where schedules are packed. Why try to reproduce that? I say, give me at least the freedom to use my time at a leisurely place." Kenji was speaking primarily about his friends, but his observations also seemed to point to his own predicament where he could not relax at home because Keiko expected that he would leave regularly. Kenji noted that he tried to create variety in his schedule by going to exhibitions and other public events.

The way Kenji spoke of retirement, it was clear that he had lost many things that had provided a sense of identity. He no longer had an identity that he could anchor to a corporation; the retiree became, in the words of a woman in the English conversation class, just a person (*tada no hito*), a deflated entity, stripped of his title and the corporate prestige that had been associated with it. Also, Kenji no longer had workmates with whom he could share the travails of work. He had lost a place of belonging. But perhaps most challenging, the loss of space of being and belonging was in some sense a highly literal problem in that home was a place where he was not comfortable settling in.

Kenji began looking for companionship through his high school reunions and met friends with whom he began traveling. He showed me pictures of a trip he had recently made to Machu Picchu in Peru. He had invited Keiko to join him, but he said she refused: "she gets irritable sitting in a cramped space for many hours." In fact," he observed, "she does travel. Last year she went to the Netherlands on a painting trip with her friends, which also involved sitting in a plane for hours." Kenji seemed bemused as he noted this.

Kenji had initially felt ambivalent about adopting a lifestyle of active ageing when he felt the value of rest at home, which has resonances with the earlier ethos of respectable elderhood: withdrawal and retreat from the everyday world as a form of transcendence and self-reliance. Cramping his schedule incessantly with mundane activities in order to remain busy felt for him like an antithesis to the life of non-attachment in retirement. As the minister-philosopher Henri Nouwen (1994) observes, people often fill their days busily because they feel that if they stop doing so, then they will feel the loneliness in their own souls. Staying busy is one way to quell the feeling of loneliness. Yet in feeling that loneliness, do people develop a feeling of hospitality and compassion? Perhaps Kenji's willingness to be busy in a lonely fashion was an expression of compassion towards his wife. Kenji did not philosophize about the value of loneliness, as he was more concerned to spend time with his wife, but it is possible that in retirement, the pain of loneliness he felt had expanded his capacity for affection for others. Besides, he lived in a social milieu where the value of remaining independent was prevalent. It became compelling for him to pursue such a lifestyle.

### *Adjustments in Kenji's Expectations*

To round out this ethnographic section, I will explore Kenji's situation. His case brings together many of the themes in this paper about autonomy and interdependence, including the unnoticed capabilities of retirees, and the dynamics influencing their lives. Indeed, elders are capable of adjustment and change following their initial difficulties in retirement. A year after our earlier interview, Kenji and I met up again. It was clear that he had slowly modified his desires for togetherness. He reported a new source of fulfillment in watching Keiko enjoy her own lifestyle:

My whole way of thinking has turned around completely. These days I feel happy when Keiko is happy or is enjoying herself. I feel I've changed in this regard. She has her own life, her friends, and

hobbies. I try my best to not disrupt her lifestyle. I make my own food. I shop for groceries. When there's laundry to be done, I do it, and I run the bath.

Kenji seemed very content in his marriage, even if it failed to entirely match his initial expectations of retired life. Surprisingly, the couple had discovered a new shared hobby: home decoration. He noted:

I am happy that Keiko shares a certain esthetic taste with me. It's fun when one's sense matches the other's. Take for example this room [that we decorated together] – I have a certain liking for minimalist décor and she also likes it, so that's great. Imagine if she liked clutter, it would be oppressive and hard for me to be in this room. But ... we have a common taste in interior décor, and we bring our hands together and say 'yatta' (yay) – do a high five. That is important.

Kenji had discovered a new way of being together with his wife by finding a point of similarity in their aesthetic tastes and interests. It was a small example of how thoughtful, critical reflection on the likes and dislikes underlying his wife's personality could have new effects on their marriage.

I don't know how my wife feels about me, but I respect her and 'take a back seat to her.' She has unique ideas and an engaging set of friends, and I feel excited about that. During my working life, I hadn't really noticed this. But in my retirement, I can see this part of her personality more clearly.

This new relationship was distinct from the settled home life and constant companionship he had initially expected. His comment reveals a new sense of contentment in discovering a new shared life rhythm. In Kenji, we also see compassion for Keiko, rooted in his own experience of dislocation and a newfound capacity for concern developed in retirement. We discern the practice of thoughtfulness (*omoiyari*) in him for the first time in decades; a greater appreciation for her feelings. Kenji saw Keiko as a separate person with unique interests.. No longer did he see her as just 'his wife' and consider only what she would do or be for him. Now he saw her as Keiko. While Kenji's story is perhaps unusual, his experience is not unique. Several other retirees described how they discovered new aspects of their wives' personalities once they left the workplace.

Familial cohesion engendered through creative uses of material artifacts that help inhabitants balance autonomy and interdependence is a key theme in the literature (Daniels 2009). Inge Daniels (2009) observes that it is important for people who cohabit to be able to read the atmosphere and create smooth human relations. She studies the activities and material artifacts in the home through which individuals generate a feeling of homeliness or participate in creating "social heat" between themselves. She contends that people need to balance togetherness with distance, and these artifacts help to do that. For Kenji, discovering a shared taste and interest in home decoration activities was one way he and Keiko could live together joyfully in the home after Keiko's initial period of difficulty in adjusting to Kenji's presence there.

**Conclusion: Retirees...remember, when creating your post-retirement life, a spirit of adventure is what matters!**

Within gender studies as developed by Amano Masako, there was significant discussion of the concept of self-reliance, particularly as it related to men nearing retirement. Amano discusses why such self-reliance is necessary and elaborates on the ideal type of personhood arising from it. She adds that the practice of independence extends beyond individual accomplishment toward interpersonal relationships of mutual support (*sasaeai*). She endorses what Carol Gluck calls a “relational theory of responsibility”, which stresses that persons are social beings who are “responsible always – and only – in relation to others” (Gluck 2009: 103). She identifies a relationship of mutual support between autonomous individuals as a condition for such self-reliance. Self-reliance thus requires a degree of autonomy so that husbands do not “lean” on their wives.

My aim here has been to outline the concept of independence that has arisen in relation to older persons in Japan, and ‘what is at stake’ for local scholars and policy makers. In emphasizing the urgency of independence, we gain a window into a society grappling with a large ageing population, as well as the gender dynamics of older-person households.

We see a difference in focus between gender studies scholars and policy makers. The former see the basis for achieving greater independence as fundamentally about managing one’s inevitable relationships of interdependence. The question is how to be in a relationship without being a burden; it is how to relate, or as Amano Masako puts it, how to support.

For policy makers, the focus on independence is to let elders remain independent from both nursing care and reliance on the state. Governments want to reduce seniors’ need for nursing care. Thus, they frame independence in terms of reducing the risk of requiring nursing care by observing dietary practices and engaging in ‘muscle-development’ programs in order to sustain health and mobility; the ultimate aim is to avoid becoming bedridden. Both valences of independence are important for understanding the experience of elders in Japan. The concept of *omoiyari* is helpful here in demonstrating that even when trying to be independent, this wish is often framed in the context of being mindful of the impact of these decisions on others.

To be a valued member of society, it is expected that a person contribute meaningfully to others’ lives. With the rising ethos of self-responsibility, the actions of being proactive and taking initiative to do things that promote one’s own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others are given renewed affirmation. As the case of redefining diabetes as a lifestyle disease (*seikatsu shukan byô*) attests, there has been a shift away from defining illnesses as an inevitable problem of ageing, to seeing them as an outcome of lifestyle practices under individual control. In practical terms, this can involve joining an exercise class, participating in a learning activity, or acting on the advice of family members who are concerned about the retiree’s wellbeing. Although the discourse of developing independence in later life may appear onerous, it can bring a breath of fresh air into the lives of retirees insofar as it spurs them into new relational worlds.

Retirement is a richly debated period of life in contemporary Japan. Along with the life stage of old age, it summons up highly contrasting images. Both concepts have become rich sites for commentators to intervene with ideas on what this period in life portends. There is a cultural expectation that men and women undergo a transformation from a state of loss to a state of clarity.



Retirees are in a transitional phase, neither anchored in the corporation nor fully settled into new

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spheres of social action. Often the strain of retirement plays out in the domestic setting. Balancing togetherness and separateness becomes a key concern. Directives given to retirees on how to live their second life vary, but they emphasize the need for the retiree to stay connected with society at large by participating in activities that engender new social networks. If they fail to do so, they may see that their personhood is slowly fading and their marriage becoming less amicable. Retirees discover that living with a spirit of adventure enables them to feel a new sense of belonging again.

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NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Historically, the ie was governed by the rule of primogeniture (White 2014). While the oldest son would continue the family line. Daughters and second sons would leave the family (White 2014: 242).

<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the Japanese cohabit with family members far more than people elsewhere. In the Netherlands, for example, 36.1% of elders live on their own, 59% live as couples, and 0.8% live with their families. In Denmark, the respective figures are 46%, 48%, and under 1%. In the United Kingdom, they are 34.1%, 53.4%, and 1.9% (OECD 2016). But one pattern is clear: mass longevity has brought discussions about how to configure life after age 65.

<sup>3</sup> Of Japanese males aged 60 to 64, 76.3% were employed, compared to 50.8% in Germany and 20.3% in France. Of Japanese women 60 to 64, 44.6% were employed compared with 32.9% in Germany and 15.9% in France. The numbers are similar for persons aged 65-69.