Anthropologies of the Japanese Aged

Chair: Mitchell W. Sedgwick, Oxford Brookes University

As the most rapidly-aging population in the world, Japan increasingly generates domestic worry while it attracts international attention from an audience impressed by Japan's statistical profile, and aware of its successful postwar public policy initiatives. Japan's audience includes social scientists, gerontologists, health experts, economists and policy makers, especially from similarly rapidly-aging Western European countries, and the media that piggybacks on their work. What is the story of the Japanese aged as it is understood by Japan anthropology, however? This panel unpacks the "state of play" in this important arena of research, gathering together anthropologists working on the Japanese aged but on quite different specific topics: from re-assessment of perceptions of the statistics, to the experience of retirement and reflections upon a life of work; from an evolving public and private division of labor in altering the traditional meaning of elderly care, to consideration of the very end of life among the Japanese. We encourage a collation of materials, a conversation about methods, and a collaboration of thought from co-panelists and a Japan anthropology audience alike regarding the present and future of this burgeoning general area of research.

Does Japan's Ageing Population Really Constitute a "Crisis?"
Roger Goodman, University of Oxford

Demographic change is certainly at the base of almost all current economic, social and political policy-making in Japan. Government reports predict the population will shrink to half of its present size in 70 years and to a third in 100 years. The combination of the unprecedented rapid decline in the fertility rate with rapidly increasing longevity has led to the sense that the country faces a 'demographic crisis'. The big question in Japan, however, is whether the ageing of the population really is the 'crisis' that it is reported to be in the media. The fact that the fertility rate is declining at the same time as the population is ageing means that there are fewer young people to support and hence the overall dependency ratio (the so-called 'productive population' of those between the ages of 15 and 64 divided by those under 15 and over 64) will be virtually the same (1.5 workers per dependent) in 2020 as in 1950 and is not expected to be far out of line with that of its OECD competitors during the first half of the twenty-first century. Moreover, Japan's older population is relatively affluent: a national livelihood survey from 2002 showed that the average per capita income of so-called 'senior households' (households with no-one between the ages of 19-64) was 91% of the average of all households; a 2003 White Paper on the Economy suggested that almost 80% of Japanese seniors considered themselves free of financial difficulties. 'Active ageing' is on the rise in Japan and many people well into their seventies increasingly contribute directly to the economy. Moreover, the current generation of retirees, especially those who retired from government service or from large companies, enjoy benefits that are better than anywhere else in the world other than Scandinavia. Rather more surprisingly, while Japan is a much more mature society than the US, its expenditure on medical care as a proportion of GDP is roughly half, due to a much more efficient system of allocating medical resources. The Japanese experience of an ageing population is in many ways a test case for other societies. The dramatic demographic shift which is taking place in the country directly or indirectly affects

every sector of society from maternity wards to undertakers. A new, more positive, view however is beginning to emerge that the changing demographic structure in Japan rather than constituting a 'crisis' could lead ultimately to a more open, international, egalitarian society with a high quality of life for the population as a whole.

Life after "Lifetime Employment"
Mitchell W. Sedgwick, Oxford Brookes University

Anthropological and other literatures on the experience and trajectories of education and work in Japan are extensive. However, apart from awareness of "golden parachutes" among hyper-elites and reports of a spike in divorces once Japanese salaryman finally get home, very little is understood about the anticipation, evolution and experience of "retirement" for Japanese men, women and their families. Variously suggested to formally begin at 55 or 60, but often reaching beyond 65, what of the 20 or 30 or more years of "retired life" healthy middle-aged Japanese can expect? Based in close relations with Japanese salaryman/informants (and their families) from large Japanese firms that I have researched for many years, this project appreciates their (and their spouse's) experience, or anticipation, of retirement. Along with tracking their day-to-day lives and concerns in Japan and abroad, I am interested in the evolution of their self-perceptions and attachments to the firms within which they have experienced, so-called, "lifetime employment". As relative elites in Japanese society, with comparatively few financial worries, their story is less troubling than many at present, or that we can anticipate in Japan's future. Nonetheless, they are and will continue to be highly influential, indeed "model," members of Japanese society. Often living abroad in Japanese enclaves, but always returning to Japan, they are a slice of a fascinating and evolving story of the Japanese aged.

The Global and the Local: Changing Meanings of Elder Care in Japan
Brenda Jenike, Lawrence University

This paper examines how Japan's national long-term care insurance program - by allowing for new forms of global and local forces in community-based elder care - is replacing traditional meanings of aging and intergenerational care for the elderly with new, consumer-driven meanings. Japanese elderly are no longer viewed simply as deserving the indulgence of family members, but as clients and significant business opportunities. Yet to stem the high costs that have resulted from this newfound sense of entitlement and growth in "Silver Business", the Japanese state has also recently worked to shift care back to local communities by encouraging, through civil society discourse and policy changes, the proliferation of local non-profit organizations in caring for dependent elders. New meanings stemming from the resulting local competition for elderly clients are now emerging.

Thinking about the End of Life in Japan.
Susan Orpett Long, John Carroll University

In this paper I explore thinking about late life from two perspectives. One is methodological. In the past 15 years, I have worked alone on an ethnographic study of end-of-life decisions and on a multidisciplinary project studying the effects of the long term care insurance system on frail old people and their families. These two experiences provide overlapping but somewhat disparate views of late life in Japan. Secondly, I want to explore the thinking about the last stages of life expressed by the ill and/or elderly themselves and their close family members whom I have interviewed. Not surprisingly, socio-centric and interpersonal concerns appear to be more important than more individually focused themes of growth or journey. Common issues in both studies include the desire not to be a burden, a strong interest in graves and in the possibility of reunions with family members who had already died, and ambivalence about social change experienced in their lifetimes.

Discussant: Dr. John Traphagan, University of Texas at Austin