

The light and shadow of ‘active and independent senior’: from life history of Japanese ‘pre-elderly’

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Abstract

This paper targets people in their fifties or early sixties and defines them as ‘pre-elderly’. This study considers what ‘old age’ means to them today. 16 pre-elderly people were investigated in semi-structured interview method. The author focuses on how informants connect their lives’ trajectories to their future and how they place their familiar others in those trajectories.

Contemporary Japanese elderly stand at a crossroad. The circumstance around them has changed since 1990s: First, the image of ‘an active and independent senior’ has been propagated by the government, academics and mass-media. Second, social security system of care has been completed, which means socialization of care. These two processes, individualization and completion of the welfare state, brought both gain and loss.

These processes can be regarded as detraditionalization which characterizes the late modern society. The loss of tradition caused a loss of what is called ‘ageing culture’ which used to interpret the experience of ‘declining’ as something meaningful. That means the elderly today have no reference to rely on. This leads them to endless efforts to be subjective. It becomes difficult for ageing people without ‘ageing culture’ to accept their own aging bodies and imagine their own old age. That is ‘individualization of ageing’. Can ‘being subjective and independent’ be a new model of ageing to pursue? The result shows that most informants cling to construct ‘private sphere’ to live their own old age. The informants repeated needs to be independent, because reflexive self-identity to construct ‘private sphere’ does not tolerate dependence on others or even mutual dependent relationship. Although old people go on to inevitable dependence on others, they disconnect inter-dependent relationship with others. Individualized ageing process appeared as ambiguous process.

Key Words: Ageing, Individualization, Reflexive modernity, Self-identity, Giddens, Beck, Social gap

1. Introduction

After 1990s, the image of ‘an active and independent senior’ has often appeared in white paper or political scheme¹. In 1980’s, sociologists and the civil service had already referred to ‘active’ or ‘independent’ as concepts to stand for the ideal image of way of life in old age. This has two main social backgrounds.

The first social factor is the protest against the conventional understanding of old people which was made by both old people themselves and sociologists. Life course approach study, for example, argued that ‘the aged’ defined only according to age was not appropriate to comprehend a variety of old people who should have each trajectory of life. As a result, the new model being different from ‘the aged’ appeared; ‘active senior’ or ‘independent senior’.

Secondly, a financial crisis of social security system can be pointed out. An expenditure on old-age pension, medical and care insurance for old people increased even to an extent that persistence of social security system is questioned. One way to restrain the financial expenditure is to expand the appliance of the beneficiary payment principle to old people. The other is the control of the amount of necessary service itself, which means asking old people for management of their own health and daily lives. Both physical and economical independence directly contributes to reduction of the expenditure.

Thus, ‘an active and independent senior’ has appeared as a response to the social problems. In some aspects, this image has released old people from the conventional understanding of them as passive existence to be taken care of, which used to cause the age discrimination. In my opinion, however, the attitude to pursue an ideal way of life in old age in terms of concepts of ‘active’ or ‘independent’ contains some problems not to be overlooked. They are related to the cooperativity between selves and others in old age. Humans can never live alone. Furthermore, daily lives of old people are filled with various relationships with children, spouses, friends, neighbors or social workers. nevertheless, too much emphasis on the ideal image of ‘active’ old people makes all these relationships fall into the negative value ‘dependence’. That means the new model has a risk of disconnection of the relations with others.

The author tries to describe the problematic as to ‘active and independent senior’. The material is the interview research conveyed at Kohoku new town in Yokohama city in 2009. In the next section, we go on to the theoretical analysis of ‘individualization of ageing’.

2. Individualization of Ageing

First, the author defines ‘individualization of ageing’. ‘Individualization of ageing’ is the process in which people positively

undertake the problems accompanying their ageing as their own private ones and in which they disconnect the interdependent relationship with other, determining the "private sphere". In Japan, 'individualization of ageing' emerged in 1990s when the social gerontology generated many studies to deal with 'subjective happiness' or 'ikigai', a reason for being or something important to live for. .

The protest against the uniform and homogeneous image of 'the aged' generated a moment for individualization. We have to demonstrate how the conventional image of "the aged" was constructed.

In Japan, 'the aged' was closed up as a social group which faced many problems such as a loss of income, a risk of dementia and chronic illness or costs for bedridden².

As Phillipson or Estes mentioned, old age or old people as a category is a social construction and is constructed in relation to labor above all³. From a Marxist feminism view, Chizuko Ueno criticized the modern power which confines women to reproductive labor in family. She indicated that Modern industrial society values productivity and reproductivity, marginalizing women or 'the aged', who don't engage in production, as second-class citizens⁴. The mandatory retirement system structurally outputs a valueless existence and drives it into a category 'the aged'.

From the late 1970s to early 1990s, an amount of protest against the concept "the aged" as second-class citizens had been made by intellectuals and old people concerned. They accused the power of creating a social category 'the aged' to confine old people in and also argued that they should recover their subjectivity and diversity. Criticism of ageism, the active theory and the life course approach study revealed irrationality of grasping old people uniformly as 'the aged' with the standard criteria of the retirement age. 'Individualization of ageing' starts from here.

To overcome 'the aged' concretely meant recovery of subjectivity of old people. For subjectivity is the most fundamental element and, at the same time, an ideal symbol in modern era. The miserable image of 'the aged' came from lack of this subjectivity.

Then, what can assure their recovered subjectivity? Actually, modern subjectivity has two phases as the reflexive modernization theory argued. In the 'first modernity' defined by Ulrich Beck, only a man can be a modern subject through the mechanism which alienated women, old people or defectives as an object to reflect subjectivity on the margin of or outside of the society⁵. That is to say, subjectivity of 'first modernity' implicitly requires the existence of "others" such as women or old people.

Then how can old people be modern subjects? In 1960s, the protest against racism, sexism and ageism in the civil rights movement were the demand to recover the subjectivity of the objects which had supported modern subjectivity in shadow. This consequently included a further

criticism for creating a new object. Here reflexive self-identity appears as a subjectivity peculiar to the 'second modernity'⁶.

Self-identity does not require an external social group to reflect it. Instead, it asks itself a question "who am I?" at all times and respond it. By doing this, it secures its own consistency and behaves as a subject. Old people's subjectivity recovered through deconstruction of 'the aged' is based on reflexive identity. This can explain the reason why the 'ikigai' or 'subjective happiness' studies came into fashion in 1990s as an answer to the question 'who am I'.

'Ikigai' and 'subjective happiness' studies offer good materials to explain the mechanism of 'individualization of ageing'. In the perspective of 'subjective happiness' study, as this word already exhibits, what is felt happy is a subjective matter. An individual can arbitrarily choose anything to fill the sign (signifier) 'happiness' or 'ikigai'. So, we only share the sign, not the contents, what can be "happiness" in old age. Even if we can find something in common, insofar as the validity is based only on each individual's preference, the commonality is just incidental and the words end up flowing as socially meaningless signs⁷. On the other hand, individuals regarded 'ikigai' and 'happiness' as one of the most important concerns. Because these become indicators to show who they are and what they want to be. That means the society requires individuals to have "ikigais" but it is thoroughly indifferent to what their "ikigais" are.

The crucial gap concerning 'ikigai' and 'happiness' suggests 'individualization of ageing'. What establishes subjectivity is the positiveness in selecting their 'ikigais' by themselves, which is the other side of exclusiveness. Of course, the actions like hobbies or regional activities can be shared with others. That, however, doesn't mean that people share 'ikigai'. It is supposed that they happen to gather as a result of their respective choices and the actions are a part of attempts to build the private spheres.

3. Third Subtitle

For those who lives individualized ageing processes, what kind of practice can be an attempt to construct a 'private sphere' in old age? In this section, we will examine the data from interview research.

The author interviewed 9 men and 7 women in their 50s or 60s living in Kohoku new town in Yokohama city. Interviews were held for about 2 hours per each. The reason why this pre-older people were picked up is that they are now facing the individualized ageing process.

The research shows the informants have many features in common about family relationships. They did not intend to bother their children about problems with ageing; insufficient pensions, economic and working costs for care, arrangement of a future funeral and disposition of bequest. Not only that

they don't want to trouble their children, but they feel they 'shouldn't'. Even the informants who took care of their parents until death would not ask their children for the same behavior. 'My son has his own life, and me too, I have to take care of myself', one informant said. Dependence on a child seems prescriptively forbidden.

They also said 'but when I have no other choice, I have to depend on my son', however, in this sense, they talked about economic support not physical care support. They prefer to receive nursing care from a stranger to a family member. It is difficult to define 'independence' in old age, but in America, purchased care service is not considered to prevent their independence as far as they pay for it⁸. Our informants as well tend to be more generous to financial dependence than calling for other supports from children.

Comparing the informant's understanding of family relationship to the image which had been conventional until 1990s, it is clear that the distance between parents and children increase and, in contrast, husband-and-wife relationship becomes closer. Especially for men, the most important other in old age is a wife not a child. On the other hand, women seem to have a complex emotion about their husbands.

Ms. Junko Kawakami had decided not to go with her husband who changed the job from a government employee to an university professor and moved to Kyusyu area. Men's business bachelor is not rare in Japan, but in this case, she did not have any deterrent like a child's school or her own job. She is a housewife and two children had already left home. 'Everybody is surprised at my choice, I know' she said:

'I'm on very good terms with my husband. We call each other almost everyday. We trust each other, so I was able to make a decision like this. My life is going on here and my husband has something to do in Kyusyu, that's it. Mother in law (who went to Kyusyu with her son) must be pleased that she can look after her son without restraint.

Although Ms.Kawakami and her husband's relationship is good, she has a little worry. 'My husband will come back soon after retirement. The rhythm of my life might be changed then'. She thinks about a necessary effort to redefine her boundary.

In the Ms.Kazuyo Koyama's case, the same weakness of 'private sphere' makes her cling to 'private sphere' in the future. Ms.Koyama lived in Singapore for 9years and in London for 4years with her husband who works for a general trading company and went back to Japan last year. Their first son was born in Singapore and Ms.Koyama brought up two children in her wandering life. Though she did not complain about the husband's decision

that family member would move with him, after her son got married and her daughter went out to enter the university, she faces her own time and thinks as below.

‘I always had something to do in each place. But I feel like they were interrupted by husband’s transfer and it disappeared in chores. Now I feel my life is cut off.’

Probably husband will not transfer to anywhere and children have already been independent, so now Ms.Koyama is determined.

‘I want to study and challenge a certain qualifying test. During last year, I experienced regional activities, too. I had not thought about my own ageing, but you know, from now on, I have to make circumstances where I can do what I want to do, I feel.’

While the boundary between ‘me’ and close others like children or partner means spatial individualization of ageing, the management of their own death means chronological individualization of ageing. Ms.Kawakami attended the class of making an ‘ending note’, which lets her relatives know where the seal or the important documents are and how her relics should be dealt with after her death. Other informants did not go so far as to actually writing ending notes, but they recognize the need of the that kind of act.

Mr.Takashi Oda who had worked for a funeral company for ten years emphasized an importance of preparation after death. He lost his wife 20years ago and now lives with a new partner who also lost her former husband. But he does not mean to get married with her lest they should worry their children about distribution of inheritance.

These two cases may not be general, but, at least, almost of all informants have once thought about affairs after death, especially about purchasing a grave for their own. Over 90% of residents in Kohoku new town come from local areas. Their family graves are in their hometowns, and it is not a realistic option to lie in family graves because they have already lost a foundation of life there. Therefore informants need to prepare their own graves. Though they say, ‘It doesn’t matter where, ‘cause I’m already dead, though.’, they consider how to avoid the troubles for the children with management of the graves. Location is more important than price. If they expect the grave to be visited, it should be placed where the children access easily. Another important factor is the type of grave: a private grave, a

charnel or dispersal. A charnel may save the children's troubles or dispersal may be a realistic option. They continue to wonder.

4. Fourth Subtitle

The result of the field research supports the theoretical assumption that 'individualization of ageing process' forces old people to construct and maintain their 'private spheres'. Now we go back to first question what is the problem of 'an active and independent senior'.

Why does construction of 'private spheres' go so far as to management of one's own death? It is because reflexive self-identity must sustain itself through preoccupation of the future. The reflexive identity has no reference to reflect it other than itself, so it continues to inquire 'who am I?' and have to answer it. It can never settle in the present and has to be renewed toward the future. In order to maintain the self, the self-image in the future must be conceived in advance. A gap lies between this image and the present self and this gap always makes the present self an incomplete collection of possibilities. This is why the informants feel it necessary to manage their future even after death.

In the process to sustain the self according to the gap with the future, there is no chance or moment for others to step in. The most important other for this self is a self in the future. Not like individualization in 19 century, the individualization as a part of reflexive modernization makes people individuals without constructing others as objects. In this era, mutual dependent relationships are replaced by the equal relationships among independent individuals in which they value the decision makings and choices of each other more than a social norm of gender or family. There even a husband or a child is one of the others.

However, is this process really possible for old people? At first, let us consider what discriminates 'ageing' from just putting on years. That is the appearance of changes of mind, body and social position in the form of dependence on others; to be a pensioner, to spend more time in a local community than before retirement and the literal dependence on family or welfare service because of physical decline. The problem and irony of pursuing 'active and independent senior' appear here. Reflexive self-identity with the secure 'private sphere' does not tolerate dependent or interdependent relationships with others. This leads the informants to the repeated phrase, 'I don't want to be a burden on anyone.' Although old people necessarily go on to inevitable dependence on others, they disconnect inter-dependent relationships with others by themselves. Individualized ageing appears as a contradictory process.

Ageing itself requires cooperativity but reflexive self-identity rejects it and tries to make old people stand up in the 'private sphere'. This trial, destined to fail, sends back old people to the only others to depend on: the

states. An entitlement of service from welfare states does not prevent independence because it's regarded as an impersonal relationship between individual and the state. This suggests people will have more and more interest in social security system.

Then, how long and how far can the welfare state support us? There is another irony. In 1980s when individualization went on, the limit of the welfare state began to come out. The last others left for individuals turned out to be too weak to support 'independence' of all individuals. From here, we could suppose a certain crisis which is now appearing among young generation; expansion and stabilization of structural social gap. This phenomenon will divide the people into two strata. On one hand, the rich can afford enough services from market. On the other hand, the poor have to be content with insufficient services from the state⁹.

We have discussed the problems generated by 'individualization of ageing'. It is impossible to show the solution for it in this short paper, but let us suggest some points of views below.

The people tend to value the time of future, rather than that of past, in the reflexive modern society, because personal identity is based on preoccupied future, not accumulation of past. Anthony Giddens argued that authority of tradition comes from accumulation of past. Modernization as a process of 'detraditionalization', as Giddens mentioned, necessarily deny the accumulated time and make people head for the future.

But endless preoccupation of the future will face an inevitable failure. We need to think about the function of accumulated time which modernization has thrown away and to seek a way to take it back. The author wants to shed light on an 'ageing culture'. An 'ageing culture' is a set of practical knowledge, images or norms to help people adapt to ageing. It is not imagined in nostalgia but derives from people's daily lives. Even though reflexive self-identity wants to ignore the others and to talk to the self in the future, it can't be denied that we coexist with the others in the present time and space. We still can discover an imprint of others in the manner of life and interpret it as a seed of 'ageing culture'.

Notes

¹ Refer to the followings. Office of Administration in Management and Coordination Agency, *Trend and outlook in measure of longevity society*,

Gyosei Publishing, Tokyo, 1993. Ministry of Health and Welfare, *Annual report of Health and Welfare*. Gyosei Publishing, Tokyo, 2000.

² Campbell, C., *How policies change: the Japanese government and the ageing society*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1992.

³ Both of Phillipson and Este argued with constructing of old age in terms of critical gerontology. Refer to the followings. Estes, C., *The aging enterprise*. Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, 1980. Phillipson, C., *Reconstructing old age: new agendas in social theory and practice*. SAGE Publications., London, 1998.

⁴ Ueno argued that modern industrial society defined old people as 'after human'. This type of alienation is not same as just ageism. Ueno, C., *Patriarchy and Capitalism: Horizon of Marxist Feminism*, Iwanami-shoten Publishing, 1990. Refer to the following also. Palmore, E. *Ageism: Negative and Positive*. Springer Publishing Company, New York, 1990.

⁵ Beck, U., Giddens, A. and Lash, S., *Reflexive modernization: politics, tradition and aesthetics in the modern social order*. Polity Press, Cambridge, 1994.

⁶ Giddens, A., *Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age*. Polity Press., Cambridge, 1991. And Ulrich Beck also mentioned that individualization needs self-identity. Beck, U., *Risk Society: towards a new modernity*. SAGE Publications, London, 1992.

⁷ Soeda, Y., 'Perspective and Criticism of Social Gerontology', in *Sociology of mature and ageing in Course of Contemporary Sociology*. M. Mita, C. Ueno, M. Osawa, S. Inoue and S. Yoshimi(eds), Iwanami-shoten Publishing, 1997.

⁸ Sano, T. and Fujita, M., *Independent old age: historical anthropology of small town in middle western America*. Keisui-sha., Hiroshima, 2001.

⁹ Beck, U. and Beck-Gernsheim, E., *Individualization: institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences*. SAGE Publications, London, 2002.

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