



**Lessons from fast ageing Japan suggest that the elderly not only needs medical attention. They are also in need of spiritual and social care, and meeting such needs calls for innovative response.**

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# Rediscovering the usefulness of the elderly can help us better understand urban woes

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NEWS reports from Japan over the October holiday suggested that elderly Japanese, some as old as 80, were still working.

I asked a native octogenarian how he felt about it.

His response was mixed — for one thing, he was glad to see people of his age continuing to serve the society, but was also sad that someone so old should have to drag themselves to the workplace.

Japan is one of the first nation to become superaged in Asia, and putting the senior citizens back to work is one way to tackle its shortage of labor.

During my brief stay in Japan recently, it was quite common to see people over 60 working at hotels or directing traffic on streets.

Exploring innovative means to tackle issues arising from a graying society was an important topic of discussion at the 11th Asian City Journalist Conference (ACJC) held in Fukuoka, Japan, last month. It was organized by the UN-Habitat Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific and Nishinippon Newspaper.

According to Takayuki Kubo, Senior Researcher and Director of Information Strategy Office, Fukuoka Asian Urban Research Center, Japan achieved urbanization ratio of 94 percent in 2014, while that of China was 56 percent.

Japan's higher urbanization ratio was the envy of many Asian countries eyeing only the growth-enabling potential of urbanization, but were not prepared for its long-term implications. In Japan for instance, low fertility rate, fewer and later marriages, and growing toleration of divorces suggested that Japan was facing a demographic crisis, and no amount of inducements seemed to be enough to stem its inexorable slide into long-term population decline.

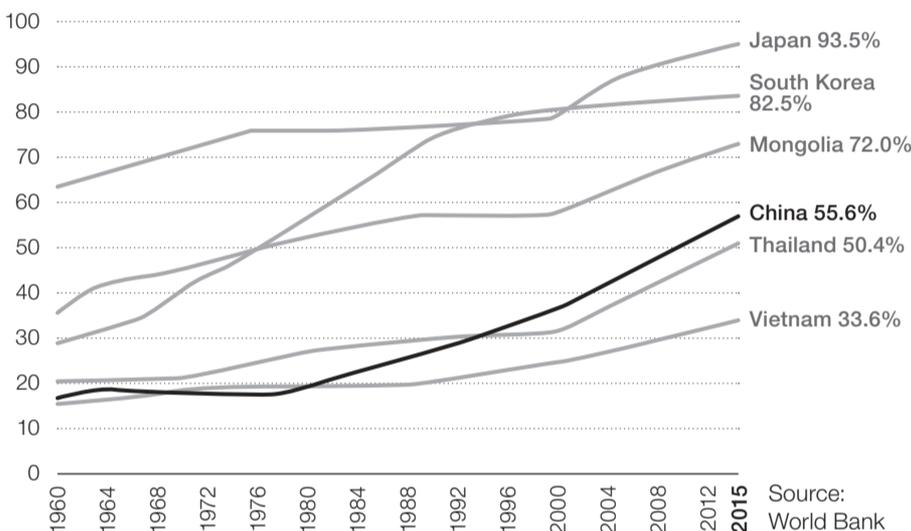
The decline became more dramatic against the backdrop of life expectancy in Japan that was the highest in the world, thanks to traditional low-fat diet and advanced medical care.

In one sense Fukuoka is still an anomaly. While the rest of Japan and Kyushu were shrinking, with the aging population (those aged 65 or older) projected to go up from 27 percent in 2015 to 36 percent in 2040, Fukuoka's working population is still growing, thanks to its position as the gateway to Asia, though its own aged population is projected to rise from 21 percent last year to 31 percent in 2040.

Fukuoka is sitting at the crossroads and, depending on the city's response

## Urbanization ratio change 1960-2015

Low fertility rate, few and late marriages and high life expectancy conspire to make superurbanized Japan superaged.



to the demographic shift, it could mean the difference between a city seeing sustainable growth, stagnation, or decline. But there is more to ageing than mere economics. Lessons from fast ageing Japan suggest that the elderly not only needs medical attention. They are also in need of spiritual and social care, and the provision for such needs call for innovative response.

## Responding to ageing

As we observed during our visits, meeting the social needs of the elderly (and children) might presuppose a reassessment of the urbanization process and traditional way of life.

In Tsutsumi-Danchi housing complex in Fukuoka, local Urban Renaissance Agency (UR) has collaborated with local universities to respond to the needs of senior citizens. While the age ratio for Fukuoka is 21 percent, it is 34 percent in this complex.

According to Naotoshi Nakamura from UR, some students from Fukuoka University have been assigned to live in the complex to help revitalize the community. Elderly people living alone prefer to stay in their rooms, and it could be difficult to know whether they are physically or mentally doing alright. Young students billeted here could arrange events and devise means to draw them out.

Students also stand to gain from the interaction. While international students get opportunities to learn the language or the local customs and traditions, local students benefit from the elderly's life experience and wisdom. Many

students have their own communication and psychological problems — lonely, depressed, or stressed out — and the elderly citizens can provide valuable advice and counseling.

In the Hoshinohara-Danchi housing complex, thanks to initiatives by residents like Mitsuko Motooka, the Hoshinohara cafe becomes an open space once a month, affording community members a chance to get together or know each other.

The response has been overwhelming. During the recent earthquake nearly 90 people turned up spontaneously. They said they seemed to feel safer by communicating with each other.

In cities, as ties with neighbors diminish, it is rarely realized how many elderly people and children live alone and eat alone in their flats. People are dying or being abused in isolation. A common meeting place enables people to meet and talk.

During our subsequent visit to Tsuyazaki project in Fujitsu, about an hour's drive from Fukuoka, we witnessed how a quiet fishing village came to life again thanks to revitalizing initiatives by former architect Ayumi Yamaguchi.

Yamaguchi used to work for one of the largest construction companies in Japan. Then he questioned the sense of development achieved at the cost of personal happiness. Yamaguchi observed that in their rush to succeed, urbanites have lost more than gained.

"In cities people really work long and hard to make themselves unhappy," he concluded.

Seven years ago he decided to settle down in this village town, which was

very quiet since young people had moved to cities.

Once known as Tsuyazaki-sengen (sengen means 1,000 houses), it used to be a thriving trading port where wealthy merchants took up residences. Today visitors can still experience its prosperity at its heyday by visiting what was once Toyomura Sake Brewery, shrines, and indigo-dyeing merchant house.

Thanks to initiatives taken by Yamaguchi, some traditional wooden houses have been remodeled and given a new lease of life serving as museums, hotels, cafes, or restaurants.

## Regeneration

The coastal village began to have a livelier appearance as people fed up with urban hustle and bustle and rat race began to move in. About 35 families, numbering about 100 people, have now settled here.

Mamoru Hosoi, a sculpture artist from Hokkaido in his 40s, now stays in the village with his family. He said that in an industrial society, people like things "fast and cheap," not knowing there was more satisfaction in things "slow and deep."

Urbanites are prejudiced about village life. People said it felt *fu bin* (not convenient) in a village.

"Not so for me ... It is just one hour to Fukuoka, and you have all the ocean and the sunset. There are many reasons to rediscover old philosophy and the way of life, something I did not find in cities. It has been like this 100 years ago, and it should be like this 100 years hence," Yamaguchi said.

Yamaguchi's daughter was educated at a nearby primary school. Yamaguchi believes that the purpose of education was communication and interaction, and at the village her daughter could talk to anyone naturally, without inhibitions, experiencing fully the "Tsuyazaki Magic," like the closeness in a big family.

In a modern society, with the rise of nucleus family, elderly people are generally considered useless.

As a result, today young people have difficulty communicating with the elderly people. But in Tsuyazaki, we witnessed how their experience, skills, wisdom and lore are pressed into service. Unlike in cities where they are more or less eyesores, here they are respected and valued.

The village experience suggests that there is a need to make sense of "usefulness" outside the narrow context of employment, and this insight might help us to better understand our urban woes.