

# Comparison of 'The Image of Old Age' among Youth in China and Japan

## 「老後」に対する若年層の意識調査の日中比較

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**Abstract** Definition of old age shifts from place to place, and from one historical period to another. In the context of China and Japan sharing similar cultural conceptions of old age, people tend to choose different lifestyles in their later years. However, with economic development and the improvement of living standards, the gap in awareness of old age among younger generations in China and Japan seem narrow sharply. This study aims to clarify this changing tendency through surveys. Instead of investigating how younger generations think about their roles in caring for elderly family members, the survey is designed to ask about what young people really expect for themselves, and what kind of lives they want to lead in later years. In this way, it is more likely to figure out the true thoughts of their image of old age and help seeking the balance between Young and Old, which I believe, hold great significance for social welfare design both in China and Japan.

**Keyword** old age, younger generation, social policy

### Backgrounds

#### *Respect for the Aged in Cultural Backgrounds*

China and Japan share many cultural characteristics in common. In regard to *old age*, it is showed similar tendencies in many literary works in both. Filial piety has been thought as one of the cardinal virtues in Chinese society since ancient times. *The text of The Twenty-Four Filial Exemplars* has stood for generations as the prime folk document on what filial piety is all about and the tales are known individually to most Chinese. In the world-famous *The Analects of Confucius*, filial piety, as the core idea of Confucian ethics for ordinary people, is constructed on the simple fact that one's body exists solely because of one's parents. Confucian advocacy of filial piety is premised upon this indisputable fact. (Hwang, 1999) As a matter of fact, Chinese government persistently preaches family values as part of the vision of a harmonious China.

The same filial piety went from China to Japan some fifteen centuries ago. Japanese have created a body of literature on filial piety of their own, one of which is *Biographies of Japanese Filial Men and Women* (Fu Song Ko Shi Dan; about 1684 A.D.) and features seventy-one stories instead. Even nowadays, both countries still celebrate *Respect for the Aged Day*, treating the virtue as essential in children's life value education. Only that as time passed, the ethic of filial piety was incorporated into a different human network from that of China, which could be apparently found in different definitions of old age. The older generation in Japan and China hereby tend to make different choices upon designing their later lives.

#### *Later Lives in Urban Area*

According to *Global Age-friendly Cities: A Guide* published by WHO in 2007, by 2030 about three out of every five people in the world will live in cities. The trend is that, more older people are also living in cities. The proportion of the older adult population residing in the cities in developed countries matches that of younger age groups at about 80%, and will rise at the same pace. In developing countries, by 2050 older people will comprise one fourth of the total urban population.

Cities are center of cultural, social and political activity, with plenty of choices and possibilities both for the young and the old. In comparison with those living in rural areas, the older people who reside in cities are more likely to access to latest information and diverse values, therefore they tend to attach great importance to their own individual achievements above the relationships they belong to. Although with the spread of Internet access, gaps that used to exist as a result of regional disparity are narrowing, just like the blurring boundary between urban and rural areas. The younger generation always has to deal with the balance between work and filial duty in fast-paced lives. In this respect, it is obvious the conflicts between the young and the old in cities turned out to be multidimensional and in a more radical way.

#### *Conflicts Between the Young and the Old*

Nowadays the elderly people, either from Japan or from China, trying to live independently due to modernization. However if we penetrate the phenomenon and explore deeper, we might easily find that older people in Japan are more active in self-choosing while the other side from China are considered left with fewer choices, culturally, socially and financially.

The Japanese parents retire into separate living quarters, variously called *inkyo ya* or *hanare*, and manage their own cooking and other housekeeping chores. (Hsu, 1971) The phenomenon was contrary to Chinese customs, however the situation is changing progressively because of one child policy issued in 1978. On one hand, for those who are born before 1978 with siblings, they, mostly sons only, are entitled to equal division of inheritance, and are obligated to assist their old parents' lives, which is opposite from the one son inheritance custom in Japan. On the other hand, since one child policy became the nationwide standard, it has been common sense that the child is the only lawful heir to the family fortune. Parents would sacrifice everything as long as their child could win glory as the one and only family name representative, which is hardly seen in Japan.

Moreover, viewpoints of marriage among younger generation should be taken into consideration. In Japan, marriage is no longer the key factor of completing one's life. Instability naturally pushes young people to rent rather than buy new houses, and many decide to settle down only when they consider having children or because of other sentimental factors. Separation from family of origin has produced emotional independence in both adult children and parents. Older parents in Japan appear to be positive in controlling their own later lives. In contrast, the pursuit of happiness in traditional Chinese families always seems less self-oriented, and closely related with the family honor. In this sense, parents see children as important family member more than individuals, although the contributions they have made for the family is voluntary, in return, when children turning into adulthood, marriage stands out to be the call of duty, for its importance of continuing the family line. Therefore, unstable relationship is viewed as irresponsible in favor of the family. Additionally, parents save for years to pave the way for their children so as to strengthen the family bond. In common sense, parents should at least afford the down payment of a house for young couple, because the share of economic benefits and burdens is believed to make strong alliance. This also can explain why financial independence is never popular in traditional Chinese families. However, Chinese youths increasingly put their own emotions above social expectations nowadays. As they see it, their role in society is no longer about their responsibilities to the family and the wider community but about their own rights. Collective identities and group membership have become secondary to personal preferences.

Furthermore, from a macro-level perspective, social welfare system counts a lot in shaping one's later life. Old people in Japan could get a sense of security from the reliable system and well-qualified public services, meanwhile the younger generation might find it rather confusing, because the low birth rate leads to no clear assurance for their old age, the chances are what they work hard for the current old generation may be paid back in vain. Ironically, the elderly people live out their fantasy while the younger generation becomes more and more conservative in Japan. On the other hand, the situation seems rather worrying in China, as social insecurity comes from both the young and the old. As is stipulated in China's Constitution and Law of the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly, the adult children are obligated to support their old parents in every aspect of life, which means that the government expects the young citizens to take the responsibility of caring for the elderly and solve problems within each family. However, without sound social welfare system provided, the elderly could hardly count on their children, instead they try to stay healthy and entertain themselves on a relatively tight budget. The basic features of main informal caregivers in contemporary society of China are summarized in Table 1, which may help understand the overall situation.

Table 1

China's Baby Boomers	Period	Features
Phase I	1950s	Majority over 60 years old*; encouraged to have children; have siblings; traditional family ethics norm; conservative about pursuit of wealth and purchase values
Phase II	1960s	Soon to be over 60 years old; one-child policy; have siblings; shaky family ethic traditions; first generation who benefited from the Reform and Opening-up Policy and eager to create wealth
Phase III	1980s	From late 20's to 30's; two-children policy; no siblings; sensitive to wealth and status; self-conscious, emotion-driven and less bound to family of origin

\* 60 years old is defined as old age in China

As is stated above, the elderly people in Japan are more likely to have control of their later lives with proper affordability, while older people from middle class in China are less self-conscious but more careful about the usage of money, leading them to different lifestyles. Apparently, conflicts do exist between the young and the old, whatever the nationality, race, place of residence, social environment or any other external factors are. And I believe the easing of the tensions is a must that should be done with the assistance from the government.

### Survey Report

#### Objections

In most previous studies regarding the aging/aged society, elderly people are always the core subject. As a matter of fact, it is good balance between the young and the old that drives the progress of the society. In this sense, opinions of the younger generation should be taken seriously because young people are very important social driving force in aging society. Their life satisfaction is closely related with the social productivity and creativity.

#### Methods

Online-based questionnaires were distributed to Chinese respondents on Qualtrics.com, paper-based were conducted by Japanese college students in Fukuoka Institute of Technology, in 2015. The survey will be analyzed using SPSS.

### Response Rate

Questionnaires with uncompleted answers or suspected unreal answers were excluded. 366 questionnaires with detailed content were collected out of 532 with the 68.8% effective rate.

### Results

Within the limited space of this paper, it is impossible to describe all the results. Basic information will be briefly summarized in words, and a couple of questions are picked up as follows to discuss.

#### 1. Basic Information

Gender distribution of Chinese respondents is 63.1% of females and 36.9% of male, while the Japanese is 32.3% of females and 66.7% of males. All Chinese respondents are aged over 25 years old and nearly half are students, while 93.4% of Japanese respondents are under 20 years old and all are college students. 72% of Chinese respondents are single in this survey, while all Japanese respondents are never married.

#### 2. Single Choices

	Questions	Nationality					
		China		Japan		Total	
		N=168	%	N=198	%	N=366	%
Q7	Very Dissatisfied	3	1.8	11	5.6	14	3.8
	Dissatisfied	20	11.9	17	8.6	37	10.1
	Neither	43	25.6	41	20.7	84	23.0
	Dissatisfied	89	53.0	106	53.5	195	53.3
	Very Dissatisfied	13	7.7	23	11.6	36	9.8
Q9	Yes, both my grandparent(s) and parent(s)	21	12.5	48	24.2	69	18.9
	Yes, my grandparent(s)	124	73.8	132	66.7	256	69.9
	Yes, my parent(s)	7	4.2	4	2.0	11	3.0
	No, no one yet	16	9.5	14	7.1	30	8.2
Q10	Yes, with my grandparent(s)	118	70.2	88	44.4	206	56.3
	Yes, with my parent(s)	11	6.5	2	1.0	13	3.6
	Yes, with other family member	2	1.2	0	0	2	.5
	No, never before	37	22.0	108	54.5	145	39.6
Q13	Very Dissatisfied	21	12.5	13	6.6	34	9.3
	Dissatisfied	66	39.3	27	13.6	93	25.4
	Neither	54	32.1	132	66.7	186	50.8
	Dissatisfied	21	12.5	25	12.6	46	12.6
	Very Dissatisfied	6	3.6	1	0.5	7	1.9
Q14	Strongly Agree	14	8.3	5	2.5	19	5.2
	Agree	46	27.4	4	2.0	50	13.7
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	55	32.7	58	29.3	113	30.9
	Disagree	43	25.6	94	47.5	137	37.4
	Strongly Disagree	10	6.0	37	18.7	47	12.8
Q15	I could totally afford expensive medical cares or nursing cares by myself	22	13.1	5	2.5	27	7.4

	I could somehow manage to pay for the expensive medical cares or nursing cares	32	19.0	7	3.5	39	10.7
	I could afford the medical cares or nursing cares as long as they are at reasonable prices	94	56.0	101	51.0	195	53.3
	I think it would be difficult to pay for the medical cares or nursing cares by myself, even normal ones	17	10.1	67	33.8	84	23.0
	I don't think I could afford any form of medical cares or nursing cares by myself	3	1.8	18	9.1	21	5.7
Q17	Strongly Agree	41	24.4	72	36.4	113	30.9
	Agree	86	51.2	82	41.4	168	45.9
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	36	21.4	36	18.2	72	19.7
	Disagree	5	3.0	8	4.0	13	3.6

In answering Q7 “Please select the face that best shows your satisfaction with you current life”, Q13 “Please select the circle that best represents your evaluation of social welfare policy in the country you settled in”, Q14 “I think the guaranteed pensions I can rely on will cover my essential expenses in later life”, and Q15 “What do you predict your payment capability will be when the day you require for special cares comes?” we may find that answers are either neutral or negative. No matter from China or Japan, young people are not satisfied with the current life and they feel insecure about the future when they get old. In answering Q9 “Do you have any family member over 65 years old?” Q10 “Have you ever had the experience in living with any family member over 65 years old?” Q17 “From my own personal experience, I find the country I currently reside in is rapidly aging”, we may find the majority of respondents have experience in living with older people, and most young people realized the population is aging.

### 3. Multiple Choices

Questions	Nationality						
	China		Japan		Total		
	N=168	%	N=198	%	N=366	%	
\$Q8	Satisfying Income	34	20.2	8	4.0	42	11.5
	Romance with a Great Man/Woman	32	19.0	21	10.6	53	14.5
	Happy Family	86	51.2	68	34.3	154	42.1
	Good Health Condition	73	43.5	75	37.9	148	40.4
	Nice Friends Around	95	56.5	100	50.5	195	53.3
	Political Stability of the country you currently live in	37	22.0	5	2.5	42	11.5
	Economic Prosperity of the county you currently live in	38	22.6	4	2.0	42	11.5
	Great Living Neighborhoods	13	7.7	49	24.7	62	16.9
	Other	20	11.9	52	26.3	72	19.7

Questions	Nationality						
	China		Japan		Total		
	N=168	%	N=198	%	N=366	%	
\$Q12_group	move into nursing houses	92	54.8	137	69.2	229	62.6
	stay at home	101	60.1	71	35.9	172	47.0
	other choices	36	21.4	47	23.7	83	22.7

Questions	Nationality						
	China		Japan		Total		
	N=168	%	N=198	%	N=366	%	
\$Q16	Spend more time with friends and neighbors	69	41.1	123	62.1	192	52.5
	Do volunteer activities	62	36.9	15	7.6	77	21.0
	Make more time for new hobbies	106	63.1	150	75.8	256	69.9
	Get further education	51	30.4	37	18.7	88	24.0
	Focus on religious activities	20	11.9	2	1.0	22	6.0
	Babysit grandchildren	26	15.5	24	12.1	50	13.7
	Travel	113	67.3	87	43.9	200	54.6
	Be sensitive to fashion and dress in latest styles	26	15.5	29	14.6	55	15.0
	Be a challenger and try something new	72	42.9	56	28.3	128	35.0
	Offer life pro tips to young people	16	9.5	33	16.7	49	13.4

In answering Q8 “the factors affecting satisfaction”, we may find the top three among Chinese respondents are friend, family and health condition, while most popular ones among Japanese respondents are friend, health condition and family. In answering Q12 “what would you do when you are so aged and in need of special nursing cares?” “move into nursing houses” are vying with “stay at home”, with more Chinese preferring staying at home and Japanese preferring moving into nursing houses. In regard to Q16 “what do you plan to do when you retire from work and are still in good health condition?” The top three among Chinese people are travel, new hobbies and try something new, while top three among Japanese are new hobbies, spend more time with friends and neighbors and travel.

### Discussion

As is summarized briefly in the survey, we can find that “The Image of Old Age”, especially the attitude towards social welfare system among youth in China and Japan tends to be close as a whole nowadays. However, the survey is not sufficiently analyzed. The correlation and other statistics methods can be applied in the follow-up analysis. Additionally, design can be improved in the question formulation. Japanese respondents are doing well. Above all, based on the similar cultural background of filial piety and urbanization in China and Japan, we can venture a prediction that universal model will be effective in new social norms and new social structures. Subsequent analysis and interview research are planned to be conducted this year.

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