NEW HOUSING OPTIONS FOR THE ELDERLY IN JAPAN: 
THE EXAMPLE OF TOKYO’S EDOGAWA WARD

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1. INTRODUCTION

With Japan’s elderly people accounting for already more than 20 per cent of the population in 2008, a figure that is estimated to grow to 30 per cent by 2025, an enormous transformation of Japan’s society is taking place. The increasing proportion and number of elderly people in Japan have significant implications for the housing and living arrangements of the elderly, including care systems for elderly people requiring help.

Although 45 per cent of people aged 65 years and older still live in three-generation households or with their (unmarried) children, the number of elderly people living only with their spouse or living alone has grown considerably in the last twenty years, resulting in more and more elderly-only households (cf. Figure 1 below).

Reasons for this development are, among other things, longer life expectancies, the process of urbanization and migration that dates back many decades and which left rural regions with a significantly higher percentage of elderly people in comparison to the metropolitan areas, as well as changes in attitudes concerning the family, new lifestyles of the younger and the older generations. This transformation as well as growing insights into the influence of the social environment on the well-being of elderly people have made it necessary to take measures in various policy fields.

Elderly-only households are not a problem per se. Given the fact, however, that sooner or later a large proportion of elderly people will require help or care, the living arrangements of elderly people have to be looked at in connection with the care arrangements provided or accessible. With the living arrangements changing, the care arrangements too are subject to change. The traditional caregivers – mainly daughters-in-law – are not available any longer to the same extent they were in the past. Higher employment rates of women (who still are the main caregivers) and new requirements for care-giving, due to medical progress resulting in longer periods of time that people have to be
A number of measures have been introduced in the field of elderly welfare and housing before, but they were usually targeted at elderly people who could not rely on a family. Enacted in 1963, the Law for the Welfare of the Elderly (Rōjin fukushi-hō), for example, which recognized elderly welfare as a comprehensive task of the state for the first time, did not lead to a new policy concerning the elderly in practice (Maeda 2000: 37). The first measure considered to have been a shift away from the family duty of elderly care, was the state-subsidized launching of geriatric health-care facilities (rōjin hoken shisetsu) for elderly people with chronic illnesses in 1988. Their aim was “to fill the gap between nursing homes and hospitals” (Maeda 2000: 42–44) and were to be used by every older person, independent of family situation or income. In the field of housing, the eligibility for public housing for elderly people (i.e., elderly couples or one elderly person together with other family members) since 1964 and for single elderly people since 1980 were major changes (Ōumi 2002: 169), just as much as the introduction of Silver Housing (shirubā haujingu) in 1987. The latter is a housing cared for, have made it more difficult to provide care, even where traditional living arrangements are maintained (Long 2008).

Taking into account the predicted increase in the number of elderly people, the Japanese government felt impelled to change the welfare system and, beginning in the 1990s – with the introduction of the Gold Plan – the problem of elderly care officially ceased to be only a private matter to be solved within families.1 Along with a home helper system

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