CHAPTER EIGHT

CHANGING SOCIAL CONCEPTS OF AGE: TOWARDS THE ACTIVE SENIOR CITIZEN

Takeo Ogawa

1. Introduction

Japan is undergoing a continuous increase in the proportion of elderly people in its population. In times when most people were dying in their sixties, those who were over 70 years old would be considered as living unusually long, and would be respected as venerable elderly people. However, in a society in which most people reach the age of 80, those who are still in their sixties are regarded as ordinary people. Nevertheless, people are expected to retire at the age of 60 and leave their posts to make way for younger generations, even though they are capable of working longer. The question I am dealing with in this chapter is: how will older persons be treated in the new ageing society, in which there is a higher percentage of elderly persons in relation to the young and a smaller working population in relation to the dependent population?

Japanese society has already reached its historical peak in population growth, and, since 2005, the population has been decreasing. The total fertility rate hit an all-time low of 1.25 in 2005, and the proportion of the population aged 65 and over is continuously growing. The working population is decreasing in scale. Although elderly people have increased in number, the burden of the working population that supports them has become somewhat lighter, because the child population is decreasing. This is called the period of “population bonus,” a term used by demographers to describe the situation in a country where fertility rates are low and the largest proportion of the population is aged between 25 and 40. According to the results of the Japanese census, the ratio of the dependent population to the working population had a downward tendency from 1950 until 1995, but changed to an upward tendency from 2000 onwards. At this point, Japan entered the phase of “population onus”, which means an increase in the burden upon working
generations with regard to social security, including pensions, medical treatment and welfare. How does the concept of elderly people change in such a social context?

2. Traditional Concepts of Japanese Elderly People

Until 1950, the Japanese population pyramid showed a high proportion of young people and a small proportion of aged people. Since there were relatively few elderly people, they were venerated in Japanese society, which valued ancestor worship and filial piety highly.

The Japanese sense of normative behaviour related to age was very strong. The traditional way of life was defined by age: school, initiation into adulthood, marriage, retirement, and so on. The local community and family life were maintained on the basis of age hierarchy, and the gerontocracy of political decision-making and the seniority-oriented order of social status were ever-present. The Japanese labour system also emphasized the seniority wage system.

The principles of obedience and respect for the elderly are strongly influenced by the spirit of Confucianism, which was a dominant ethical tradition in East Asia. Among the ethical precepts of Confucianism, filial piety is an important value, according to which children should obey their parents and take care of them in old age. Filial piety was positioned as a fundamental norm of social order and was generalised in the priority of seniority. Not only did the older parent have the highest status in the family, but also the oldest person had the highest rank and prestige in society in general.

There was one key difference in the status of an older person between Japan and other East Asian societies. In China or Korea, a senior person was always the head of a family. However, compared with these East Asian countries, it is conspicuous that Japanese society has developed the social norm of “disengagement from the position of household head”, the so-called inkyo, which means retirement from active life and the ruling position in the patriarchal family system. On reaching the age of 60, or at the marriage of the eldest son, the head of the household passed on this role to his (or her) successor and turned from being the supporter to being the recipient of care. The Japanese system of retirement continued until after World War II. The old parents yielded most household rights to the first-born son, built a retirement room or a retirement house and moved into it. Although retired people in