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### The Elderly of Osaka

My first impression of the city of Osaka: bicycles and outdoor vending machines. A *lot* of bicycles and outdoor vending machines. Everywhere I looked, I saw businessmen, students, mothers with their babies, all riding bicycles on the sidewalks and across the streets. Everywhere I turned, I saw vending machines that featured anything from iced coffee to sports drinks to peach sodas. My second impression of Osaka? There are a *lot* of elderly citizens.

For three weeks, I stayed in Osaka, Japan as one of the San Francisco-Osaka Sister City Association's Student Ambassadors. I set about the task of exploring the effects of the large aging population currently characteristic of Japan and many other developed nations. More specifically, I aimed to delve into the *lives* of elderly citizens, who were everywhere—on the buses, subways, in the malls, museums, and parks, on the streets, riding bicycles.

Certainly, the aging population of Japan has been the subject of much discussion, study, and research. By now, it is widely known that the population of Japanese people who are age 65 and over has dramatically increased in the recent years. This is evidenced in various national censuses and population counts—the elderly population accounts for 25.1% of the total population, according to 2013 estimates from the Statistics Bureau of Japan (SBJ).

With this in mind, I spent my eleven-hour plane ride to Kansai International Airport eating, trying to sleep, watching comedy movies, and contemplating how I would transform percentages into stories and snapshots of the lives of the elderly in Osaka. In the end, I hoped to do three things: (1) analyze statistics of Osaka's population to identify and confirm population

trends, (2) observe the general public to find out what the elderly do on a daily basis and what role the local government plays in their lives, and (3) conduct an in-depth study featuring my host family to get a clearer sense of how the elderly live and how this could lead to considerations for the future.

I acquired statistics specific to Osaka through online research and with the help of the International House of Osaka. According to a census released by the City of Osaka, the percentage of citizens age 65 and over was 22.7% of the total population in 2010, up by 13.1% since 2005 and up from 20.4% in 2007. According to a Statistics Bureau of Japan census in 2010, the second largest age group in Osaka Prefecture was that which contained those age 60 to 64. The number of general and dental clinics and pharmacies has increased over the recent years, as have medical care expenditures and benefits for the elderly. These data imply that population trends in Osaka mirror those of Japan as a whole: The elderly population has dramatically increased, and policies and services have adjusted to accommodate it.

Observation of the elderly both bolstered and colored the statistics. In between the humidity and the mosquito bites, cicadas' chirping, *okonomiyaki*, and convenient subway rides, I witnessed the elderly citizens of Osaka play *shogi* in the parks, participate in knitting seminars at the Natural History Museum and elderly choruses at the International House, take photographs at the botanical gardens, and play with babies while waiting for the bus to arrive.

Various programs and local systems have enabled this widespread activity of the elderly in Osaka. The public transportation system and many recreational places such as zoos and parks offer discounted fees or free admission for those age 65 and over. Public transportation in the city serves as a way for the elderly to retain their vivacity. They are not "stuck" at home but instead journey around the city to both medical and social appointments, spending time with

friends and enjoying the many recreational opportunities Osaka has to offer. The buses, especially, are convenient for aboveground travel.

While riding the buses myself, I saw many elderly citizens get off at stops to visit large community service centers, hospitals, and medical facilities. With closer observation and research, I found that local community and support centers provide information about health care and welfare and offer general consultation and help. In addition, the city of Osaka provides the elderly with various daily life support services, as well as allowances and aid, including meal delivery service, the provision of in-home care products and daily-use equipment, an emergency reporting system, and medical aid. Thus, the elderly have many resources that they can access both in and outside their homes. The existence of such a great number of support services and benefits not only acknowledges the growing population of elderly people but also shows that the local government and organizations in the area are willing to adapt to changing demographics to serve the Osakan people.

What about my own host family? During my time in Osaka, I stayed with my host mother, herself a member of the elderly community. On some days, after observing the elderly on my many adventures throughout the city, I would come home to ask her questions regarding what I had seen, along with questions about her daily life and the government systems in place to serve the elderly in Osaka. Through this, I was able to get an even better sense of how an elderly person might live.

My host mother volunteers at a local middle school, teaching math and English. She goes to the nearby park every morning at 6:30 AM to exercise with other members of the elderly community. Her hobby is golf, and she has traveled to Europe numerous times. Many friends frequently visit her; she is always updated on the lives of her family members and friends.

My host mother lives alone, as her husband has passed away, but her six grandchildren, all of whom are male and two of whom I had the pleasure of meeting, visit her regularly. According to my host mother, in contemporary times, the elderly often prefer to live separately from their children. If an elderly couple does move in to live with a daughter's household, two different name signs are displayed on the outside of the house, signifying there being two generations under one roof. When asked why she does not live with her children, my host mother stated she likes her personal freedom—she can play golf and travel—and does not wish for differing opinions to lead to constant fighting.

Typical of the elderly, my host mother receives a pension from the government every month. Her medical payments are relatively small, even though she visits a physical therapy clinic a few times a week. This is because the elderly pay only a small fraction of the amount needed for hospital and medical clinic visits. Also, the elderly do not have to pay taxes on certain goods or services, such as golfing. However, the burden falls on the younger generation. According to my host mother, the lives of the younger generation are becoming stricter, since it must pay an increasing number of taxes to the government, which must support the increasing number of elderly citizens. To ease this, the government may decide to change the law to reduce pensions.

On one of my last days in Osaka, I asked my host mother about the government's role in helping the elderly. She first mentioned that the city government aids the elderly by allowing them to fill out a form to ask for help. An elderly person can fill out a form for minor or major illnesses or for other troubles. Helpers may come to clean or take care of an elderly person *if* a form is passed. According to my host mother, however, at times the form is difficult to fill out

because many questions require a certain degree of specificity. Therefore, it may be difficult for people to get aid quickly.

In addition, as the number of elderly citizens increases, the numbers of volunteer helpers and hired caretakers for the elderly have increased as well. In my host mother's view, she herself is lucky because in three years or in the near future, she will have a caretaker if she needs one. However, there might be a shortage of volunteers and caretakers as the years pass and as the population trend continues. Also, since some caretakers are not paid very much and may not enjoy their jobs, conflicts could arise.

My host mother's account sheds light on the problems that might occur in the upcoming years. The population trends will continue to affect the constituents of a household, Japan's pension system, and taxes. Both the national and local governments will have to continue to work to provide improved services for the elderly while considering the consequences for other age groups.

As for my own personal experiences and research on the elderly of Osaka, it is helpful to note the limitations. First, a part of my research findings stems from observation. I went to and explored the places where the elderly citizens I saw went, and most likely, certain facts are missing. Moreover, I conversed with the friends of my host mother and thus used my connections to conduct short interviews and to ask questions. Through my host mother, I was able to ask other members of the elderly community about their hobbies and daily activities, to get a better sense of how the elderly spend their time—I found the elderly have hobbies from *origami* to baking to reading to calligraphy. However, the research I did during my stay in Osaka is based on the lives of the people I met and talked with—it is not necessarily representative of all the elderly citizens in Osaka and in Japan. Finally, approaching and talking with people who I

didn't know well was at times difficult, due to both the language barrier and the fact that people are sometimes unwilling to reveal too much information about themselves to relative strangers. This restricted the amount of information I could obtain.

Nevertheless, I was able to answer some important questions and gain a perspective on the future in regards to the elderly populations of Osaka and Japan as a whole. Is the general trend in Osaka the same as the national one? What do the elderly do? How do the elderly themselves feel? How has Osakan society changed from the past? What can the local government do to further improve the lives of the elderly in Osaka?

Through my experiences, I have discovered a significant role the elderly play. They are important members of society because they embody community and liveliness. They travel around the city, participating in various recreational and group activities. They are closely tied to their children, grandchildren, and friends, who comprise an irreplaceable support system. They continue to act together, creating and maintaining strong bonds. They contribute to the culture and unique atmosphere of Osaka and Japan.

Statistically, estimates for the near future have the elderly population in Japan comprising even higher percentages than it does today. As population pyramids show, in two decades, those who are now middle-aged will become elderly, adding to the aged population. The bottom line is that there is predicted to be a significant increase in the elderly population in the upcoming years. This increased population of elderly people will influence the direction of politics (who is voted into office and who stays in office), the economy (higher tax burdens on the younger generation), and society as a whole. Shortage of labor in the workforce as more people age and retire, limitations on the expansion of the economy, and public policies relating to the pension system, retirement, and health care are all predicted issues of the future. Japan will accommodate for

these changes, just as the world continues to accommodate for the changing times. As for me, one statement by one of my host mother's friends sums up a good deal of my own impressions of the elderly living in Osaka: "The population may be increasingly elderly, but [the] elderly are still *genki*, you know."

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