The term “Aged Society” (kōreishakai) invokes more negative images than positive images in Japan. Images that come straight to the mind include a pension system that may not be able to cope with such a large aged population, demented elderly and suffering family caregivers, public care services, and abandoned elderly and lonely deaths, among others. On the other hand, Japan has a large number of centenarians with the longest living ranked among the top in the world. These centenarians attract the attention of scientists and researchers who want to investigate the secret to a long life. Although many older people do not like to be called “elderly” (kōrei), when one enquires the elderly person’s age, he or she often answers with pride, giving the image that he or she has done well to live to such an old age. This results in contradicting and ambivalent feelings towards the elderly in Japan.

In the past, studies of the elderly have focused on the period near the end of life when care is needed by them. As life expectancy of the Japanese continues to rise over the years, so has the disease-free life expectancy. The Japanese elderly can expect to live more than seventy years without impairment, not requiring care and not being bedridden (Cabinet Office, 2012). In the past, the elderly have depended mainly on family for their later years. Hashimoto (1996) found that the Japanese adopted a “protective” approach in the care of its elderly. They first assumed the elderly to be needy and believed it was the responsibility of the younger generation to pay back care as an obligation. Since this research and numerous others, Japan established the Long Term Care Insurance system in 2000 with the objective of supporting the elderly to be independent. Now with the system in operation for more than ten years, has the elderly person in Japan become independent and has the family changed its protective approach towards the elderly?

This research seeks to understand how active elderly people or “active older adults” maintain an active and independent lifestyle, how independent of the family are they and what they expect of the future living in contemporary Japan.

This research is based on a sample of thirty-five urban, older adults between the ages of 60 and 85 who are active (genki), that is, not requiring any formal or informal care. It also includes eleven younger adults between the ages of 30 and 59 who have parents meeting these conditions. The informants live in the Tokyo Metropolis (23 special wards and Western Tokyo or Tama Area) and Kanagawa Prefecture and one city in Tochigi Prefecture.

A qualitative research methodology has been adopted for this research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the informants from June 2009 to December 2010. The interviews covered questions formulated around the Active Aging framework established by the World Health Organization (WHO). The questions focused on the older informants’ daily lifestyles, family structure, contact and exchanges, relationships with their children, their motivations for living (ikigai) and their expectations of the future. In the case of the children, questions were focused on their parents, covering the same areas.

Results found that the older adults were financially independent and led active lifestyles that involved both work and leisure activities. All of them were working hard to maintain both their physical and mental health in order not to be a burden to others. Although they had a vibrant social network, especially in the case of the women, only a few would actually want to depend on their friends or neighbors in case of need. Many also said that they would not want to put the burden of care upon their children. They preferred to handle everything by themselves, perhaps with the support of services available through the Long Term Care Insurance.

The older adults have therefore taken a strong stand towards their own independence. In fact some of the older adults demanded independence of their unmarried children as well and asked them to move out of their natal homes around 25 to 27 years old. However, other older adults continued to allow their children to live at home and yet others had to deal with problems faced by their already married children who had returned home. Therefore, even though the older adults desired independence and worked hard to maintain it, some of them had to navigate around children who continued to be dependent. It was also found that both the parents and the children were reticent in expressing their feelings and emotions. This is one possible cause for the older adult to decide not to depend on their children in later life.

This generation of older adults has shown strong determination to be independent and they have shown their adaptation and resilience to navigate the intricate family relationships to maintain their own independence, their own world to craft a better later life for themselves. As they grow older, they will need to adjust to physical and mental changes but with adaptations and support of family, they can continue to age actively.

References