Summary of Doctoral Thesis and Report of Examination

To the Dean: We report the result of Examination for the Doctoral Thesis below.

Student I.D. No.: 4007 S 014 - 9
Name: Lum Soon May

Title in Japanese: 現代日本の元気な高齢者家族との関わり様式と自分の世界とのバランス
Title in English: Active Older Adults in Contemporary Japan—Navigating Family Relationships and Independence

Faculty Members Involved in Oral Examination

Chief Referee of the Screening Committee
Name: Glenda S. Roberts
Affiliated Institution: GSAPS
Status: Professor
Ph.D. from Cornell University

Deputy Advisor (Member of Screening Committee 1)
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Member of Screening Committee 2
Name: Ruth Campbell
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Status: Visiting Scholar

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Affiliated Institution: University of Tsukuba
Status: Associate Professor

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Name: 
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Date / Time: (Y)2013 / (M) 04 / (D) 05 / (Time) 5
Period 1st: 9:00-10:30, 2nd: 10:40-12:10, 3rd: 13:00-14:30, 4th: 14:45-16:15, 5th: 16:30-18:00, 6th: 18:15-19:45, 7th: 20:00-21:30
Venue: 501

Result: Passed/Failed (Circle as appropriate)

Attached document(s) 7 pages (Approximately 4,000 characters in Japanese, or 1,500 words in English. The Doctoral Thesis title, however, must be written in both Japanese and English.)

5. 担当者のみ [if any]
Name: 
Affiliated Institution: 
Status: 
Ph.D. from 

6. 附属資料 Attached document(s)
1. **Summary**

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, this study uses anthropological research methods to ask whether the elderly person in Japan has become independent and whether the family has changed its protective approach towards the elderly. This research seeks to understand how active elderly people or “active older adults” maintain an independent lifestyle, their level of independence from their families, and their expectations of the future. It is based on a sample of thirty-five urban older adults aged 60 to 85 who are active (genki), that is, not requiring any formal or informal care, and eleven younger adults aged 30 to 59 who have parents meeting these conditions.

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 author found that older adults have 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 homes around the mid-twenties.
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 parents and children were reticent in expressing their feelings, possibly causing the older adult to decide not to depend on their children in later life.

The author found that this generation of older adults has not only shown strong determination to be independent, they have shown their adaptation and resilience to navigate family relationships to maintain their own world to craft a better later life for themselves. Lum concluded that as they grow older, her informants will need to adjust to physical and mental changes but with adaptations and support of family, they can continue to age actively.

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3. Content

In Chapter One, the author defines the main terminology used in the thesis and then goes on to perform the literature review, which includes a literature review of previous studies on aging in Japan, as well as theories utilized to understand aging in the life process. She explains her own theoretical framework of “Active Aging” as well as the significance of her research. She then goes on to note her qualitative methodology of interviewing and participant observation, and she explains the structure of the dissertation as a whole.

Chapter Two consists of background information on Japan as an aging society, including an overview of changes in the economy in the post-war period, Japan’s social security systems such as pension, health, and Long Term Care Insurance System. The author also provides an overview of the evolution of work and the family system in Japan.

In Chapter Three we are introduced to the author’s main informants in the study, the parent generation and the child generation, both of whom are middle to upper-middle class in terms of education and income level. In this chapter the author discusses the retirement transition stage for both men and women, the nature of work in the ‘third age,’ couples and gender roles, leisure in the ‘third age,’ and social networks. She discusses gender differences in all these dimensions of the ‘third age.’

Chapter Four provides us with a discussion of older adults in relation to their
families. Here the author reveals to us the geographic proximity of the older adults to their children, their frequency of contact and the meaning of contact, the nature of inter-generational exchanges, emotional closeness, and the informants’ thoughts on how independent or dependent they desire their children to be from themselves.

In Chapter Five, we learn of the expectations these older adults hold for their futures. Topics discussed are their self-perception of their own roles as parents at this stage in life, their children’s notions of the parents’ roles in their lives, plans for the ‘fourth age’ of frailty and death, motivations for living, and their efforts toward independence.

The sixth chapter consists of analysis on the informants who were ‘sandwiched’ between their children and their parents or parents-in-law. These people’s thoughts on how they themselves differ from their parents’ generation are analyzed, such as more household participation and willingness to care for parents themselves among the men interviewed.

In the Conclusion, the author reminds us of her assessments of the people in her study in terms of the two main theoretical frameworks she utilized: ‘Active Aging,’ a framework from the WHO that includes more macro-level factors such as health and social services, physical environment, social and economic determinants, as well as micro-level factors such as behavioral and personal determinants, and Bengston et al’s ‘Intergenerational Solidarity’ model, elucidated in Chapter 4. In terms of the former, the author finds that in light of the social service systems Japan has in place for older citizens, as well as through the lens of the research she has done on middle and upper-middle class families, Japan is performing well overall in supporting Active Aging. In terms of the latter model, Lum uses the model’s determinants to provide a multi-faceted portrait of the families of these older adults. She explains their strategies to maintain active and independent lifestyles in this stage of life, and she further explains their desire to be independent of their families. For the most part, her informants are able to maintain their independence while simultaneously maintaining a level of connection within which they feel comfortable. Importantly, Lum notes that some of her informants’ independence was disrupted by dependent children, whether unmarried or married, who have returned to the natal home for various reasons. In these cases, older adults feel uneasy about continuing to provide support, yet they allow the dependence. In terms of the expectations of
the fourth stage of life of frailty and death, Lum finds that unlike earlier research by Hashimoto (1996), wherein older adults assumed they would need care and receive it from family members, the majority of Lum’s informants expect to use LCTI and receive care from the State. In addition, her informants expect to receive some informal care from their own families and, in the case of couples, care for each other, or “self-care.” Lum argues that older adults prefer this care-model because they do not wish to place burdens on their children, so in a sense it is self-sacrificial, and enabled by the presence of LCTI. Beyond this, however, she finds that a lack of genuine communication between parents and children sometimes seems to prevent parents and children from expressing their true feelings in regard to desires for care or companionship, resulting in parents hesitating to place burdens even though children speak of being willing to take on such burdens.

**Evaluation**

This thesis presented new and interesting qualitative data on intergenerational relationships and the lifestyles of active elderly people in urban Japan, situated in theoretical frameworks in gerontology and informed by the ethnographic literature on Japanese society. Although there have been studies performed by others on the aging society, none that I have seen use the analytical frameworks used by Lum to apply to conditions of life for elder urbanites in the Kano area. In fact, although Japan, as the most rapidly aging society worldwide, should be inundated with scholars studying changing lifestyles and values regarding aging, there are not so many studies in English available at this time. The PhD committee evaluated this thesis highly for these reasons, and also because we found it to be comprehensive and compellingly written. This is in no small part due to the strong efforts of the author, who gave us the first draft of the thesis well before her final presentation, so her dissertation itself was the product of much reflection and rewriting based on extensive comments and critiques from the committee. The product she presented at her final was a soundly written, persuasive, and interesting dissertation. The committee feels Lum has uncovered some valuable findings regarding the aging urbanites. They seek to stay healthy and active as long as possible, and they strive to be independent of their children. No longer do they expect to rely on children in their final days, but instead they hope to maintain warm but separate relations. Furthermore, in the course of her research, Lum discovered some situations, no doubt stemming from the current age of economic stagnation, wherein aging parents were not able to maintain their independence. Their adult children had moved back...
into the parental household. This was an extremely interesting finding, and, should she choose to carry out further research on such families, may result in a deeper understanding of the nature of interdependence among families today. Furthermore, Lum’s discovery about communication problems between the generations and the resulting misunderstandings, was fascinating and deserves more research in the future.

Of course as with any dissertation, the committee also had critiques. We noted that had Lum included in her study elder adults who were from different social class backgrounds (working-class or small shop owners, for instance), her results may have been different. Furthermore, the thesis might have been enhanced had a chapter on aging as viewed by media discourses been included. Moreover, we wondered how the single elderly manage in the Tokyo metropolitan area. In her first draft, there were too many ethnographic stories without sufficient analysis, so we asked that these be better categorized and streamlined. We asked that she make clear the social class backgrounds of her informants and reflect on how this might have influenced her findings. In the final version we also asked that some extraneous material be cut. We pushed Lum to think further on the meaning of the parents’ self-sacrificial attitudes, as well as the communication difficulties some of them had with their children. She was able to carry out most of these suggestions in her final version, although the class variations, more extensive media analysis and elders’ reactions to media, and more in-depth research on the nature of elder-parent/child communication, and the implications of the “third age” for the marital relationship itself, will have to wait for her next research. As a committee, we are very satisfied with this and agreed unanimously that she be granted the PhD for this significant endeavor.