Title  "Who Will Care For Japan’s Frail Elderly?  Köreikyō’s Co-operative Model of Home Care"

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Synopsis

For the well-being of Japan’s elderly to be maintained in their own homes, a number of difficult questions must be answered in the context of the rapid aging of Japan’s population. The elderly are increasing absolutely as well as relative to other fractions of the population, and households of only elderly members are rising. Who will care for the frail elderly? What kinds and levels of care can be available to whom? How will this care be provided? As those whom tradition had designated care-givers – daughters-in-law typically 35 to 55 years of age – become less and less available, a variety of alternative possibilities is emerging. This paper presents one model for home care with growing popularity nationwide among the elderly, that of the Köreikyō (Senior Co-operative).

Köreikyō is a rapidly-growing novel hybrid cooperative which combines features of consumer and worker cooperatives of, by and for over 100,000 seniors. A co-operative is an economic organization through which their investment and control provide members with specific goods or services not as attractively available to them otherwise. In the Köreikyō model, the active elderly (roughly 55 to 75 years old) provide care for the frail elderly (generally 75 and older) in the care receiver’s own home through the co-operative’s home-helper dispatch centers. This expense can be reimbursed by national long-term nursing care insurance (kaigo hoken) under defined conditions.

The complexity of Köreikyō’s organization goes well beyond the market model of a simple instrumental nexus in which an activity once embedded in family practice becomes commodified and then professionalized. Köreikyō provides a sense of community and of personal worth (ikigai) to members as givers of care, receivers of care, and participants in the co-operative’s many different other social and work activities. That this model does present a significant shift from both market and traditional solutions to who will care for the senior generation, does not seem a drawback to members. Participant observation at the Kawasaki chapter of Köreikyō provides much of the data in this paper.

KÖREIKYŌ, JAPAN’S SENIOR CO-OPS

The question looms, who will care for Japan’s frail seniors as Japan’s population ages and shrinks, and old patterns of both care and work dissolve. After reviewing the relevant demographic data I will discuss changing patterns of care-giving and work in Japan. Formerly, daughters-in-law between the ages of 25 and 55 were the primary care-givers to the young, the old and the male. Employees and men in family businesses expected to work until age 55, when they typically retired to reduced situations, but not simply to a life of consumption divorced from compensated work.

As these patterns of care-giving and work continue to change by age and gender, social responses to the needs of the frail elderly are also changing. In this paper I introduce a novel option for home care in Japan popular with frail seniors, able elders and care givers alike. Köreikyō, or Senior Co-operative, combines features of worker co-operatives and consumer co-operatives, of, by and for people 55 and older. The question remains open how much of increasing demands for home helper services Köreikyō might someday be able to shoulder as it continues to grow.

Demographic Context
September 15th is “Respect for the Aged Day” in Japan. On that date in 2003, almost one-fifth of Japan’s population, 10 million men and 14 million women, were 65 and over, which makes Japan’s the oldest national population in the world.

Japan’s population is aging at a pace outside human experience. In 1947, the average life expectancy for Japanese men exceeded 50 for the first time. Now Japan is the perennial winner of the popular National Life Expectancy Olympics, for both men and women. By 2002, men could expect to live 78.3 years and women 85.2 years. A child born in Japan in 2000 could expect to live 74.5 healthy years.

Conversely, the total fertility rate, the number of children a woman bears in her life, has fallen to 1.3, well below the replacement requirement of 2.1. The demographic pattern Japan has shown for several decades now couples increasing life expectancy with falling fertility. The resulting population continues to grow older more and more rapidly.

By 2015, approximately one in four Japanese will be 65 and over. Western nations will stand at roughly 20% aged 65 and above by 2025. In the 21 years from 1985 to 2006, the ratio of the elderly in Japan rose from 10 to 20 percent. Western nations are expected to take about 40 years to cross this territory.

At the same time, Japan’s population began shrinking in 2005, with 20,000 fewer people than 2004. Now at 127 million, estimates project Japan’s population to fall steadily to 100 million by 2050. About 37% of the population will be 65 or older by then. The population 75 and older, designated the “frail elderly,” will rise from about 5% now to 17% by 2025, and then slowly reach 20% by 2050. The number of children under 15 will gradually drop to about 10% by that year. In former Prime Minister Hashimoto’s words, “There is no doubt that Japan will become the first nation in the world to experience unprecedented aging.”

Japan’s sense of care

Now let’s look at the issue of long-term care for the elderly. As I mentioned earlier, there is a long tradition of extended family care of the aged in Japan, mostly by women. Just over half (50.3%) of Japan’s elderly continue to live with their children or other family members in three generation households. However, with more women joining the labor force, care providers in the home aging, one and two member households increasing, and fewer children being born, families are losing their capacity for caregiving. A long-term care insurance system, kaigo hoken, was introduced in 2000 to reduce the caregiving burden on families and women in the labor force.

The number of aged persons needing long-term care stood at 2 million in 1993, has reached 3 million now, and is expected to increase to 5.2 million in 2025. And as the elderly increase in numbers, and as their ages extend into longer periods of reduced capacity, they will require additional care to maintain their well-being. At present about 3 million people 65 and over – 12% of everyone 65 and up – need long-term care. Of this number about 700,000 are institutionalized, and the rest live in their own homes. Most of these people who need long-term care, now receive services through kaigo hoken. Everyone over 40 is enrolled in this insurance program and pays a small premium. People 65 and over are entitled to home-helper services and visiting nurse care, day care and brief stays at nursing facilities as needed, according to the judgment of a trained care plan manager.

The central focus of this long term care insurance plan is to help seniors to live in their own homes as long as possible. This insurance provides them the varying degrees and types of care they require to do so, based only on professional medical assessment of their requirements. When no longer able to remain at home, they can receive care in institutions under this program. One of the effects of the introduction of kaigo hoken has been a dramatic increase in demand for care services, especially home care attendants. Nakane Junko has found that, as might be expected, “Home-visit care is the service clients complain most about. The complaints are mostly about the quality of the services and attitudes of
the care workers. The root causes of the problem are related to inadequate training of home-helpers’’ (Nakane 2004:19).

In the original plan, homemaking services were considered simply part of housework and their importance in helping seniors remain independent were not adequately recognized. Fees for personal care services such as bathing were almost three times those for homemaking services. Because of this difference, even when they needed personal care, some clients wanted to only use homemaking services, to keep down their own costs. Revisions in the fee structure in 2003 brought these services’ costs closer together. Homemaker services are licensed but the licensing requirements are kept separate for the grades of home helpers qualified to provide these different services.

As a result it became necessary to develop training programs for professional long-term care specialists who could provide care together with family members. Many new jobs in the home care industry have been created. Much of this increase in demand for services was foreseen, if imperfectly, within the context of expansion of services based on need rather than ability to pay or household composition.

Part of the plan was designed to encourage businesses through tax incentives to provide employment to senior citizens who would enter this field. Such measures have been represented as necessary to sustain the balance between social welfare and economic growth. It was the other half of the compromise that made passage of the kaigo hoken law surprising and sudden. Household members were freed from pressures to provide care to members by the provision that only care expenses from certified non-family care givers could be claimed for reimbursement.

Japan’s sense of work

This LTCI plan has thus created a windfall to those, including seniors, willing to enter the home care industry. There is certainly some unknown, and possibly large, number of seniors who might want to do so. The notion of retirement in Japan does not broadly support the idea that a person will stop working and only consume. Japanese have long retired, but from one level of work to another appropriate to one’s capacity with increasing age.

This practice arose in an agricultural society of small-scale village farming governed by a military caste, allowing the responsibility of maintaining the family to be passed in a timely way to the successor. But it is worth noting that retirement was historically a formal institution in Japan. In the modern era, 55 was designated the retirement year; more recently mandatory retirement age at large firms and government agencies has gradually crept up to age 60.

In Japan in 2002 about 21% of people 65 and over – about three times as many males as females – continued in the labor force, quite high compared to the US at 13% or the UK at 9%. In general, nevertheless, as the social security system has improved, the fraction of seniors at work has declined. It is not easy to untangle the complex motivations of seniors who continue to work for compensation. While Japan is a wealthy nation, and a majority of seniors report themselves well-off, many seniors continue to work after formal retirement both to earn needed income and to maintain a sense of self-worth, in Japanese, “ikigai.” About 16% of the elderly live in severe impoverishment.

Although there is a general impression in Japan that the elderly have saved over many years of economic prosperity, and so are fairly well-to-do, using only the mean to make this judgment creates serious misunderstandings. As one example, there are a number of older females who live alone on low incomes and are financially vulnerable. During World War II, Japan lost nearly 3.3 million young men. More than 2 million women lost the opportunity to marry and raise a family. Many in this group of women had cared for elderly parents in extended households in the past, but those in need of long-term care today do not have families to rely on themselves, and many of them are quite poor, often having supported themselves and even their elderly parents, as working women.
Köreikyō, Japan’s Senior Co-operative

I myself became aware of the existence of this category of women from Yoshida Emiko (75), a member of the Köreikyō linen changing crew I worked with at NewGreen Nursing Home in Kawasaki City. Handing me the end of a sheet as we were changing a resident’s bed together one morning, she told me “I don’t have any children of my own, because I never married. I was born in Manchuria when it was part of Japan and after my father died there near the end of the war, my mother and I were brought back to Japan. So I’ve had to work to support myself all my life. Without a family of my own, this chance to work here and rely on Köreikyō means a very great deal to me. I’m sure I’ll need it even more in the future, so I’m really grateful it’s here.”

The first Köreikyō chapter was started in 1995 by a retired labor organizer in his 70s who was diagnosed with diabetes. His own situation led him to explore ways seniors might help themselves by helping each other. He had long been involved in efforts to find paying jobs for the elderly in Japan. His experience with cooperatives expanded through the years as the Elderly and Chronically Unemployed Peoples’ Union, which he helped start in the early 1970s, gradually evolved into a worker-owned, democratically-managed cooperative business, the Japan Worker’s Co-operative Union, by the mid-1980s.

By the start of kaigo hoken, in April 2000, more than 27,000 of Japan’s seniors had already joined Köreikyō chapters around the country. Köreikyō now has over 100,000 members and a chapter in each of Japan’s 47 provinces. The Kawasaki City chapter that I got to know in 2003 has about 400 members. The current goal of the national organization is one million members. There is no mass membership organization for the elderly such as AARP in Japan yet. Köreikyō has a long term goal of making itself this kind of widely familiar advocate for Japan’s elderly.

Köreikyō is a co-operative, a business owned by, and run for the benefit of, its members. All Köreikyō members make a one-time purchase of a capital share in the co-op when they join (about $50 US and which is returned to members when they leave the co-op). They pay an annual $30 membership fee which includes a newsletter subscription. Members benefit from using the services their co-op provides rather than from profits on their investment. Typical of co-operatives everywhere, Köreikyō is run democratically. Members elect a board of directors and officers, and each functioning group within the local chapter sends a member to their board. What makes Köreikyō an unusual co-operative is the way it combines features of both consumer cooperatives, which are common in Japan and elsewhere, and worker co-operatives, which are not.

These two different kinds of co-operatives are combined by the simple method of a “pay-as-you-go” ticket system. The different prices of the co-op’s services are published, and generally kept slightly below market prices. Members buy books of tickets and as they use co-op services, they turn over the appropriate number of tickets to the co-op member providing the service. Service providers – themselves all co-op members as well – in turn redeem the tickets they’ve collected at the co-op office for their pay. And the co-op retains a small amount from each transaction to pay their local and national professional staff, and finance continuing expansion.

An organization of this sort – of, by and for seniors with diverse interests – is necessarily more complicated than a brief description can encompass. One ongoing discussion concerns the appropriate mix of services which commercial enterprises also offer, and the many other activities sponsored by the co-op that members enjoy with each other for their own sake. And even here, distinctions are not always sharp. I met Uchida Hiroshi for the first time at the Kawasaki Köreikyō office where he had come to find a suitable activity for himself:

“We, my wife and I, became members because we appreciate the personal touch and the safety of the drivers. She has diabetes and gets dialysis twice a week. So people from the Köreikyō pick her up and drop her off. It is so much better than taxis and it’s a little cheaper too.

“We heard about Köreikyō from a flyer at the hospital. Now, I don’t know what I can do, maybe pruning and the like, but I’d like to be more active and do something with people in the group. It is
really difficult for men much more than women to become involved in something in the neighborhood. Everything is about work, for men. But you can’t just stay home all the time watching TV, you’ll go boke (senile) in no time. So while I’ve lived right in this area for a long time, I really haven’t been involved locally. But it’s so important for people to help each other and do things together. This is really the principle behind cooperatives, whether consumer cooperatives or medical coops or senior coops. What can people do together, that’s what we have to discover.”

There are lots of things people do together as Köreikyō members, not all of them exactly what one might think would be part of a business. In addition to their home helper service, nursing home assistance, and transportation for dialysis and other kinds of therapy, Kawasaki Köreikyō provides a variety of other activities to its members, among them the clothing re-tailoring group “ReForm,” and the home environment repair and renovation services to which Mr. Uchida alluded above. But there are also many activities for members that are not strictly business services, such as touring and hobby groups (knitting, doll-making), social service group volunteer opportunities, organizations to raise funds for Köreikyō and other charitable institutions, reading and discussion circles, and newsletter publishing. In other parts of the country, chapters provide lunch and dinner cooking and home delivery, and day-care centers for seniors. Köreikyō even operates three assisted living centers.

Köreikyō is also becoming a major educational institution, although this was never part of its original plans. In 2000 the Japanese government instituted kaigo hoken, Long-Term Care Insurance, for the elderly. Overnight an immense demand for home helper training that would lead to certification was created. Köreikyō members started programs to train and certify themselves, opening these programs to the general public with the support of municipal governments, which are responsible for administering kaigo hoken. The training of home helpers and the operation of home-helper dispatch stations has become a major part of Köreikyō activities. And its training program is extremely popular. The one I passed through in 2003 was also offered to non-members, only some of whom wanted employment in the field. I was surprised to find out that most simply wanted to become recognized, competent care givers for their own family members.

Until quite recently in Japan, daughters-in-law and daughters were the primary care givers at home to the elderly who were fortunate enough to have families to care for them. But there are many tasks seniors prefer to have someone their own age do for them, such as, especially, help with bathing, dressing, hair care, and feeding. And they like to have people of their own generation to talk to at home at any time. On the other hand, they prefer to have someone from their own family cook and shop for them, someone who already knows their tastes. Survey after survey show widespread overall satisfaction with kaigo hoken among family members, care givers and the elderly who make use of it, but there are complaints of a lack of trained and licensed home helpers. Köreikyō has surveyed its members as both clients and providers of services with sophisticated tools and always received very high marks. No member who began home helper services with Kawasaki Köreikyō has changed to a different home helper provider.

The way in which kaigo hoken and Köreikyō dovetail does not show Japan at its best, however. There remains significant age discrimination in employment in Japan. In 2003 I worked for a few months with a crew of Köreikyō members who changed and laundered the bedding at NewGreen, a progressive, private, non-profit nursing home. Even this institution for the elderly, so widely praised for so much else, still advertised to hire a geriatric nurse “no older than 55.” All Köreikyō members are older than 55.

Conclusion

Tanaka Michiko is 76 years old. One morning she came in “to just help” change sheets with her Köreikyō linen changing crew at NewGreen Nursing Home. Ito Hana, chief of the crew, worried that Mrs. Tanaka was not yet fully recovered from her stomach surgery six weeks earlier and might be returning to work too soon for her own good. “She lost over 10 kilos,” said Mrs. Ito, “but I couldn’t keep
her away.” Mrs. Tanaka is a high energy person, and just lights up any room she enters. All of the residents and staff were just beaming when they saw her again, and she had something amusing to say to each person she met.

At age seventy-six, Mrs. Tanaka could find suitable work, take off time for surgery, recover at home with Köreikyō home helper services, and return to work more or less at her own admittedly rapid pace, all because she is a member of Japan’s new Senior Co-operative, Köreikyō, a hybrid consumer and worker co-operative of, by and for seniors. Köreikyō’s central mission is to find ways to help seniors remain in their own homes as long as they possibly can, and it approaches the problem from both ends: how to get frail seniors the help they need to stay independent, and how to help able seniors find worthwhile work that pays. With this, they can stay active and add value to their lives through service to others. Members create community as they provide services and receive them, as Mrs. Tanaka and many other have already done.

Additional Reading


Nakane Junko 2004 Elder Care in Japan. Perspectives (Gerontological Nursing Association (Canada)). 28:17-24.


Traphagan, John and John Knight, eds. 2003 Demographic Change and the Family in Japan’s Aging Society. Albany: SUNY.

WWW Pages

Köreikyō Homepage: http://kourei.roukyou.gr.jp/

Japan Worker Co-operative League Homepage -- http://www.roukyou.gr.jp/


Japan Aging Research Center Aging in Japan Homepage -- http://www.jarc.net/aging/03oct/index.shtml