

On the Watershed of Becoming Old: Talking about aging among a group of elderly Japanese retirees

Academic Essays

ABSTRACT

This paper is about the relations between work, rhythm and life course among a group of elderly members of a rice paddy collective in Kyoto, Japan. Through the stories of people's professional work, personal lives and recreational activities, I portray and discuss their understanding of aging and elderhood. Also, by illustrating the rhythms of two elderly people in their retirement and in their post-work activities, I argue that underlying the particular changes of their rhythms are their reminiscences of their working lives.

keywords: rhythm, aging, life course, professional work

Xinyi Lin

I want to express my gratitude to my host family in Japan. Without them this thesis could have never come about.

In the summer of 2017, I was in Kyoto, Japan for two months working with a group of elderly people in a rice paddy. Growing rice was a leisure activity for my informants; it was an errand keeping them busy and helping them cope with aging. The age of my informants fell within the range of 69 to 80 years old. This generation are the ones that worked in machinery, textile, chemical, electronics and later tertiary industrial sectors, who bolstered the Japanese post-war economy until the early 1990s. Despite their advanced age, many of them were still working freelance or had just retired from industry. By living in their neighbourhood, I learnt more about their personal lives, their work and their view of aging. According to Eisenhandler (1989) and Danley (2013), from a phenomenological point of view, becoming old does not simply mean one's reaching a certain age, but refers to the certain set of conditions or changes one chooses

RE:THINK Journal of Creative Ethnography.
Vol. 4, Issue 1, Spring 2023 ISSN 2516-8088
(Online) Supported by the University of
Edinburgh. All rights reserved.
<http://journals.ed.ac.uk/rethink>

On the Watershed of Becoming Old :



Figure 1: The paddy. Own work.

to correlate oneself to a particular stage of the life course. In the following, we will also see what becoming old meant to my informants, and the ways they were trying to cope with it.

On the Watershed of Becoming Old

Dunmire (2000) says, that by scheduling time, ‘a time limit or temporal demarcation [is] placed on the task’ (p. 98). The temporal demarcations here, I suggest, when formulating a task, also create a rhythm out of them. This rhythm structuring the time with work/non-work demarcations is something typical of workers in capitalist societies (McCourt and Dykes, 2013; Stevens, 2013; see also Thompson, 1967). As we will see later, for people who have newly retired from capitalist professional work, this rhythm, that featured in their life when they were as young capitalist workers, is important. It affects the way they understand their life course, and affects their life after retirement. In the following, I would like to mainly draw on

Endo-san’s case to discern this.

When I roamed onto the topic of his age by accident, Endo-san and I were by the side of the paddy. He was opening the water-gate then, letting the water into the paddy. It must have been a very hot day - I remember the sweat constantly streamed down from his grey hair, through the wrinkles on his cheeks, and dropped down from the tip of his jaw at a point of convergence. Endo-san said he was among the ‘super-aged’. Later, he tried to add even more modifiers to his description, saying that he was of the ‘most super-aged’, as if one were not enough. This bit of self-recognition was actually not too exaggerated – Endo-san had reached 80 in March just this year. And reaching 80 seems to stand for a huge turning point of Endo-san’s life, because of a striking incident that happened suddenly after that – he got fired by his employer.

After 20 years working as a regular contract worker for a textile firm, Endo-san ‘eventually’ lost his job – as he put in a way of bitter self-mockery. The textile maker, Kawashima Selkon, is one of the best-re-

puted in Kyoto – a detail that Endo-san mentioned every time he talked about it. The firm was comprised of two departments, and the one that dealt in kimono fabrics and textile fine arts was the one that Endo-san was registered with as an employee. Endo-san was a handbag-maker. Before that, he was a tailor, making cheap backpacks sold in supermarkets for a garment manufacturer. It was his passion for kimono and crafts that drove him to Kawashima, and kept him there for 20 years. I knew he loved his old job. He talked about it with me through his excited gesticulation of the drop curtains, and of the kimono belt that he saw coming out from people's hands and old weaving looms in Kawashima factory.

In fact, though, Endo-san worked more at his own office near where he lived. On my first visit there, I was impressed by its compactness and orderliness. Fabric rolls of different sizes stood at the corner, with a large working stand occupying the centre of the room. It was in this workshop that Endo-san had made handbags in all styles for 20 years by his employer's orders. Some of these handbags were made of leather, large-in-size, durable looking, intended for ladies' office everyday use. Others were more compact, their outsides covered with embroidered Japanese-style textiles, designed for older women who need refined clothing for elegant social occasions. All the bags are polished, with neat, straight stitching - handiwork that only comes from experienced and dedicated tailors. The finished products, after being handed

over to the company, were delivered to department stores over the city where they would be sold at a price that is around 10 times the wage given to Endo-san (3000 Japanese yen per bag(1)).

For Endo-san, life used to be regulated by the orders and delivery deadlines assigned by his employer and before each deadline, he clearly felt his life was stuffed by work:

'For example, [my employer would be like -] "for the handbags being made today, I need however many of them tomorrow". They would order me like - "Give them to us!"... There were times like that... .. so it would be harsh for me then....I would need to stay here every day... And, when there was no work, I would just be put aside by them.....'

In Endo-san's narration, we could see, as a worker in a capitalist system, he felt his life was clearly divided into distinctive segments of 'harsh work', and 'being put aside'. These time periods are segregated by temporal demarcations – times when he was given an order and the delivery deadlines assigned. These constituted the structure of his time, and the rhythm of his life – a rhythm defined by work.

It was not long after Endo-san got fired that he first told me about it, and it was also at that time that he first addressed his aging. Apparently, he still hadn't totally settled down from the shock:

Endo: '20 years, I've been there... so ridiculous...'

Me: '20 years...Since you were 60?'

Endo: 'Exactly.'

Me: '.....seriously...'

Endo: [Indignantly] 'Yes. And I turned down all other offers - worked only for them.'

(1) 3000 Japanese yen = 18.680 pounds, based on the average rate in March, 2023.

On the Watershed of Becoming Old :



Figure 2: The autumn of harvest 2017,
Photo by Teruko-san, the contact person of the works at paddy

Me: 'Right...'

Endo: '.... I don't know why... Our manager got changed last year. And the moment it changed, many old chaps were kicked out..... Isn't it cruel?!'

Me: 'Ohh...'

Endo: [Sigh] 'But.... yeah..... I am old after all.....it is probably time to stop.'

Endo-san felt he was old. He felt old only when he realised he had lost his job. Therefore, becoming old, to Endo-san, means a change in his working status – from employed to unemployed. Being old, as we can see here, does not refer to simply being at a certain age, but also to a certain set of conditions or changes one

chooses to correlate oneself to a particular stage of one's life course – a point Eisenhandler (1989) and Danely (2013) also indicate in their researches of elderly people's views on life course regarding illnesses and spiritual beliefs respectively.

What I learnt from Endo-san is that the life course is like boundary work, with different changes, conditions and events built up as milestones by the individual on their life trajectory, marking and demarcating out different stages of their life. Endo-san identifies his moving from adulthood to elderhood with his working status, and so, working status becomes his milestone. Although as many argue, the choice of events or changes (milestones) to construct and understand his life course is often socially and culturally embedded

(Gardner, 2000; Shweder, 1998; Traphagan, 2000), here I want to focus more on how individuals' own experiences they have acquired over the past affect their understandings of their life course. Standing in line with Giddens (1991) and Hareven (1991), I understand people's current stage of life as a reflection of cumulative past events – namely, their past life.

Being old, to elderly people, often means a change in their rhythmic and temporal experience. For example, Lager, Hoven and Huigen (2016) in their study of elderly members of a neighbourhood in northern Netherlands, notice the 'slowing down' of everyday rhythm in old age. Living right next to Endo-san's office, I was familiar with the rhythm of Endo-san's life when he was still working as a contract worker. I did feel that the rhythm of his life changed after he lost his job. I felt the changes when I saw his car less often in the garage – the car I would usually see when I strolled over from my house to the supermarket in the afternoons. Endo-san didn't come to his office as often as before – it used to be a working place he frequented, particularly when he had received new orders. When orders were received, he would usually stay there from noon until the early evening before dinner.

Now, he just popped into his office once in a while. He said he needed to clean out the paper patterns he used to standardise the handbag measurements, so sometimes he would come to work on this. Sometimes he would come to sort out the excess of fabrics left from his former work; sometimes, though, he would just come over and sit there, simply flipping through the catalogues for the golf contest he volunteered for.

Endo-san spent less time in his

office, and along with it, he lost the rhythm of his life; the orders and delivery deadlines – those demarcations of time that once dictated his life disappeared. Now, he just came to the office whenever he wanted. Sometimes he seemed to come with an aim; sometimes he didn't. I would see him wandering around here and there – he would hover around like a plastic bag drifting in the wind.

Endo-san also felt the fading rhythm himself. He disclosed this to me when we talked about his plan to run a vendor stall at the handmade craft market in the shrine nearby. He brought this thread into a piece of reminiscence on a trade fair he once attended:

'[In the fair,] once you get orders, an order will come for like...around 100 [handbags]... That number was very attractive... so I saw it as a good chance But I was still doing work here [for Kawashima]... so it was difficult to take part in that sort of thing.... Well.... I am sacked from the firm now... I lost my job... I am free... so I wanna take on the challenge again [by displaying and selling his handbags in the craft market]....'

Endo-san indicated the fading rhythm in this comparison between the trade fair and the craft market, and between the past and the present. In the past, when he was an official worker of the company, he felt bound to his working schedule. Now, after losing the job, he lost his schedule – the schedule that once segregated his time into work and rest disappeared. The rhythmic texture of his time faded away.

And as he said – he was free. I would argue that the 'freedom' here is not as positive as it sounds. It stands, at least partly for an unbound-ness – not only unbound from any activities, but unbound from a rhythm – no more deadlines, no more assignment dates that regulate his

On the Watershed of Becoming Old :

time and urge him to work, no more demarcated linearity. The ‘freedom’ is of the rhythmless-ness of his life and of losing the self-empowerment of being able to do what he wants. For Endo-san, to take on the challenge of exhibiting crafts in the market again is in part to fill the lack of a rhythm – to fill the emptiness of time, as I will argue again later in the next section.

This aspect of the loss of rhythm, also voiced itself in another piece of narrative by Endo-san, when he addressed another reason why he is still making handbags –

‘...[W]ell, and the fabrics, there are so many of them here ... I don’t wanna waste them. So I will just do it, for time-killing..’

The lack of rhythm, I suggest, is reflected in the word ‘time-killing’. The vocabulary of ‘time-killing’ was often used by Usui-san, another elderly member of the paddy, in explaining why he came to the paddy so often –

‘Well... people like us, you know – we have nothing to do at home.... We just sit there for the whole day... it won’t bother me too much, even if I come here... for time-killing...’

‘Time-killing’ here, I suggest, echoes the concept of ‘timepass’ as suggested by Jeffery (2010) in his ethnography on educated unemployed young men in India. As noted by Jeffery (2017), ‘timepass’ is defined as ‘the action or fact of passing the time, typically in an aimless or unproductive way’ (p. 407). Fuller (2011), in his review of the same notion in modern India, calls it ‘killing time by doing something that is neither serious nor productive’ (paragraph 10). In brief, it is the ‘having nothing to do’ and ‘sitting there

for the whole day’ as mentioned by Usui-san – passing the time by doing meaningless activities.

And the meaninglessness of the activities one conducts for ‘timepass’ renders the meaninglessness of the time that one passes in it. Time is ‘featureless’ (Jeffery, 2010, p. 76), something felt by Usui-san, as much as by college students in Meerut, India - a time experienced as neither linear, nor cyclical, nor a combination of both. Fuller (2011), instead, remarks on such a time as ‘unstructured (paragraph 9)’, which brilliantly conveys the rhythmless-ness of such time – no longer segmented or marked by anything. In this way, time takes on an emptiness – like a hollow that contains nothing – in which one falls down and down but never touches the ground as time passes – a hollow of uncertainty. And this uncertainty is a core experience one acquires when one is suddenly abandoned by the rhythm of one’s life. As the anthropologist Archambault (2015) says, ‘a rhythm, with its recurrence and tempo, brings [...] a degree of certainty’ (p. 129). Therefore, the loss of rhythm results in uncertainty, and thereby, I would argue, temporal anxiety. It is this uncertainty and anxiety that drove Usui-san to kill the time. However, unlike students in India who kill time by ‘timepass’ – wandering around and doing meaningless things, Endo-san’s and Usui-san’s ‘time-killing’, I suggest, has its own meaning. A meaning I will discuss next.

Retaining the Rhythm, Reminiscing on the Past

Usui-san is 73 years old now. He used to be a construction worker in a demolition firm before he developed cancer a few

years ago. Teruko-san said Usui-san couldn't carry out the heavy manual labour demanded by demolition when he got to a certain age, and even less so after getting ill. His supervisor was concerned about his condition and allocated relatively light tasks to him, such as taking pictures off the walls, but a few years later even these tasks became too hard for him. So he withdrew, mostly by his own wishes, since he knew he was not as able as before. This was acknowledged by his employer and colleagues – in this way, Usui-san retired unofficially from the firm by tacit consensus.

Usui-san has always played an active role in the paddy activities. Unlike most of the others, he goes there almost every day – as he put it, 'I'm here when I'm not seeing the doctor'. It usually takes him two hours to commute to the paddy from where he lives. Bus, subway and one more bus – then he arrives and starts working. In the paddy, he is the one that takes the work most seriously. Teruko-san, another paddy member, appreciates the tidiness of the ridges he has weeded over, and I remember Usui-san's silent figure, pulling weeds alone – something that I would see from afar almost every time I wound my way down the narrow path to the paddy. Even so, sometimes he would still complain that his illness makes him sweat so much 'on just a little bit of work' and need to take a break. During the short breaks he took, Usui-san would light a cigarette. The choky smoke coming from his cigarette often reminded me of the smell of the construction workers from rural areas in my country, a smell I would catch from their jackets as they passed me by in the streets of my hometown in China.

I was astonished at how frequently he chose his tasks from his surroundings

– those tasks whose importance I would have completely neglected:

'Must pull out the weeds now. We won't see the snakes hidden there, right? If I don't.'

Spending much time here, Usui-san is all too familiar with the paddy. From one day to the next he can identify subtle changes and plan the tasks for the day accordingly. He assigns himself tasks to be done, one after another. In this way, Usui-san's time spent working at the paddy was marked by dense and ever-emerging deadlines of tasks, which very much resembles a typical working schedule experienced by capitalist workers.

Usui-san told me that he 'has had nothing to do' for six or seven years. Six or seven years, as he remembers it, is not the time since he had withdrawn from work, but the time in which he 'had nothing to do'. When he has nothing to do, time becomes empty. His life does not have its rhythm any more. This emptiness of time, and loss of rhythm, is distinct from what Usui-san felt when he was still a functioning worker. Therefore notably, the boundaries of his life course, as revealed when Usui-san looked back on his life, were marked most significantly by the rhythm and temporality he felt, rather than his working status – unlike Endo-san. By these marks, Usui-san identifies his changes, his moving from one stage to another on his life course. In their study of older people's memory, past experiences and place attachments, Rowles and Watkins (2003) propose an *experience-based life course model of being in place*, highlighting the role that disruptions of environmental experiences caused by geographical displacement play in elders' understanding of their life course. Here, using Usui-san's case, I would like to sug-

On the Watershed of Becoming Old :



Figure 3: Usui-san working at the paddy. Own work.

gest instead an *experience-based life course model of being in rhythm and time*, and highlight the significance of rhythmic changes that work, or lack of work, make in elders' life-course construction.

The emptiness of time, as I have argued previously, leads to Usui-san's uncertainty and anxiety, which makes him realise that the time needs to be killed. To Usui-san, the paddy is for time-killing. It takes up most of his waking life now. Every day he would take one of the earliest buses there and leave for home according to the returning bus schedule after a few hours of work. On reaching home, he would head directly for bed, and in the next morning when he woke up, waiting for him would be another trip to the paddy. A regular schedule of paddy attendance is thereby established.

Maybe just as his friend Hongo-san

said, the paddy is good for Usui-san, because he 'developed his rhythm' by his work in it. Indeed, with the paddy, his life is no longer rhythm-less. As I have argued, the time spent on the paddy is characterised by the deadlines of the tasks that Usui-san experiences. Moreover, his life is rhythmised by the alternation between the working time he spends in the paddy every day and the rest of it, demarcated by, if not clear temporal demarcations, then at least a regular schedule.

I further argue that such a rhythm of life is in part made by Usui-san himself, by the way he chooses to engage with the paddy. As growing rice on the paddy is their leisure activity, there are no coercive working schedules imposed on paddy members. Usui-san's particular ways of committing – coming to the paddy day after day on a fairly regular schedule, or

assigning himself many tasks– are ultimately his own choice. Thus, the rhythm that is constituted by these activities is also a choice he has made. Therefore, by working in the paddy in such a manner, Usui-san opted to create a certain rhythm for himself.

However, the question that follows on from this is – why did Usui-san choose to create such a rhythm? I would like to argue here that it is because it resembles the rhythm that Usui-san had experienced as a construction worker before his unofficial retirement. To him, it is the rhythm of clocking in and out of his company; it is the rhythm by which he dismantled the walls of derelict houses for two hours with a hammer, and drank beer with his workmates afterwards. To Usui-san, life used to be regulated by his profession. It was regulated by the alternation between linear working time and time for recreation, and the temporal demarcations that segregate them.

Therefore, I would like to suggest an analytic perspective here in terms of how to look at his choice to retrieve his rhythm – that his struggles to resume the rhythm now are a form of nostalgia in which he recalls the past, when he lived a similar rhythm.

The same, I suggest, goes for Endo-san. When he talked about making handbags for time-killing, he was killing time as a way to resume the rhythm. This is indicated in the way he talked about the temporal relation between making handbags and the craft markets:

‘[For running a stall in the markets] I need to make the bags first, right?.... it’s handmade, so it’s like.... I would need to make a few before bringing them there [for sale].....’

This comment shows me that Endo-san is

also calling for a way to restructure his time and retrieve a rhythm. He is clear that each craft market in Kyoto has its schedule to be adhered to. I argue that with these schedules, he regulates part of his time into linear working time. As he said, he would need to make handbags first before the markets’ schedules. In this way, the markets’ schedules are like deadlines for him, by which time he finishes up a quantity of work. By these arrangements, a rhythm of alternation between his linear working time and the rest is constructed. This rhythm is almost the same as the one he felt when he was working as a contracted handbag maker, when his life featured by working hours and was regulated by the orders and delivery dates. I argue, it is his experience of his former rhythm that has led him to make this choice of activities now, and that like Usui-san, with this rhythm, he reminisces and reaches out to the past when he was young.

I would therefore like to conclude here that ‘time-killing’, for both Usui-san and Endo-san, takes form not as blocks of meaningless activity merely to fill in the emptiness, but as a meaningful resource for reminiscing on their past experiences. The rhythm they endeavour to reproduce through ‘time-killing’ in their post-capitalist-worker life echoes the rhythm they used to live as capitalist workers when they were young. For Usui-san, it was the rhythm of moving through clocking in and clocking out, between manual demolition work and recreation; for Endo-san, it was the rhythm of orders and delivery deadlines, with quantities of working time he spent in his office. The paddy and the handbags are different elements in their lives they rely on to retrieve such a rhythm – one with alternation between working time and the rest, the segments of which

are demarcated by temporal points.

Here I shall further emphasise that these specific approaches to reminiscence find their base from Usui-san's and Endo-san's past experiences when they were young as capitalist workers. Then, the work/non-work alternation marked by sharp temporal divisional points was their rhythm of life, which they resonate with and remember by their bodies and emotions. Their efforts to reproduce such a rhythm is therefore a form of reminiscence and an effort to reach out to the past as elders feeling old, and feeling their time to be empty.

Conclusion

We can see throughout this article how life course is understood by people according to different measurements. Unlike some scholars' focus on how understanding of life course is culturally embedded (Gardner 2000; Shweder 1998), I have stressed the significance of one's past personal experiences in the mapping of one's life course. Usui-san's and Endo-san's identification with their working status and the rhythm they lived are the references for them to demarcate the stages of their life course.

Becoming old was therefore perceived by the change of rhythm and loss of working status; the ways to deal with crossing the watershed of oldness turn out to be fulfilled by the elders by reconstructing the working rhythm that they were used to as capitalist workers. Their efforts and attempts to retain those rhythms thus can be seen as a way of reminiscing and of paying tribute to their youth.

References cited

- ARCHAMBAULT, J. S. (2015) 'Rhythms of Uncertainty and the Pleasures of Anticipation', in Cooper, E. and Pratten, D. (eds) *Ethnographies of Uncertainty in Africa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 129-148.
- DANELY, J. (2013) 'Temporality, Spirituality and the Life Course in an Aging Japan', in Lynch, C. and Danley, J. (eds) *Transitions and Transformations: Cultural Perspectives on Aging and the Life Course*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 107-122.
- DUNMIRE, P. L. (2000) 'Genre as Temporally Situated Social Action: A Study of Temporality and Genre Activity', *Written Communication* 17(1), pp. 93-138.
- EISENHANDLER, S. A. (1989) 'Social Aspects of Time and the Identity of Elders', in Thomas, L. E. (ed.) *Research on Adulthood and Aging: The Human Science Approach*. Albany: SUNY Press, pp. 163-181.
- FULLER, C. (2011) 'Timepass and Boredom in Modern India', *Anthropology of this Century*. Accessed on 10/12/2017 at <http://aotcpress.com/articles/timepass-boredom/>.
- GARDNER, K. (2002) *Age, Narrative and Migration: The Life Course and Life Histories of Bengali Elders in London*. Oxford: Berg.
- GIDDENS, A. (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- HAREVEN, T. (1991) 'Synchronising Individual Time, Family Time and Historical Time: The Life Course Approach', in Bender J. B. and Wellbery D. E. (eds) *Chronotypes: The Construction of Time*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp.

167-184.

JEFFREY, C. (2010) *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

JEFFREY, C. (2017) 'Timepass', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 40(2), pp. 407-409.

LAGER, D., Van Hoven, B. and Huigen, P. P. (2016) 'Rhythms, Ageing and Neighbourhoods', *Environment and Planning*, 48(8), pp. 1565-1580.

MCCOURT, C. and Dykes, F. (2013) 'From Tradition to Modernity: Time and Childbirth in Historical Perspective', in McCourt, C. (ed.) *Childbirth, Midwifery and Concepts of Time*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 17-36.

ROWLES, G. D. and Watkins, J. F. (2003) 'History, Habit, Heart, and Hearth: On Making Spaces', in Warner Shaie K., Wahl, H., Mollenkopf, H. and Oswald, F. (eds) *Aging Independently: Living Arrangements and Mobility*. New York: Springer, pp.77-98.

SHWEDER, R. A. (1998) 'Introduction: Welcome to Middle Age', in Shweder R. A. (ed) *Welcome to Middle Age!: (And Other Cultural Fictions)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 9-15.

STEVENS, T. (2013) 'Time and Midwifery Practice', in McCourt, C. (ed.) *Childbirth, Midwifery and Concepts of Time*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp.120-142.

THOMPSON, E.P. (1967) 'Time, Work-discipline, and Industrial Capitalism', *Past & Present* 38, pp. 27-40.

TRAPHAGAN, J. W. (2000) *Taming Oblivion: Aging Bodies and the Fear of Senility in Japan*. Albany: SUNY Press.