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*Successful Aging in a Rural Community in Japan*  
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# Successful Aging in a Rural Community in Japan

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*Kimiko Tanaka dedicates her work to her grandparents and parents  
who emphasized the importance of women's education,  
her spouse who strongly believes in gender equality,  
and her daughters who love to read.*

*Nan E. Johnson dedicates her work on this book in loving memory  
of her parents, Joseph Van and Catherine Wood Johnson,  
and in honor of her sister, Dr. Kay Johnson McCrary,  
who are examples of successful aging.*



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## Series Editors' Preface

### *Lessons in Living: Social Capital in Kawanehonchō, Japan*

*Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart\**

This compactly written book deals with how seniors, female and male, manage and enjoy their lives in the town of Kawanehonchō, Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan. Tanaka, one of the two authors, herself came from a small rural area, and seems naturalistically to have known how to carry out the fieldwork which forms the experiential basis for the book.

The study has a two-fold methodological approach. One is to give a quantitative conspectus of the structural picture, how the township is served by municipal agencies, what resources there are for the seniors in the community and what informal networks of support exist. The largely positive findings from the fieldwork are notable, given that the town was first established only in 2005, following an amalgamation of two former local towns. Remarkably, they seem to have fused well, at least in terms of welfare services for senior residents. At the outset of their book, Tanaka and Johnson deploy the concept of social capital as a way of assessing quality of life. Social capital refers to resources that people can look to for help with circumstances of their lives. Such capital can be, the authors note, either horizontal in character or hierarchical. The former refers to relatively egalitarian relationships, based on kinship or locality, and the latter on structures of government or administrative authority.

Horizontal social capital is perhaps the most significant resource for people, but the authors note that town authorities also provide a wide range of supporting services, public transport for access to services and events, man-

agers who help plan happenings and assist in making participants feel at ease, and also volunteers who give unpaid help to seniors.

Managers help participants to feel they have *ikigai*, 'the purpose of life.' Events take place in small settings. Festivals are organized in honor of a local deity. Participants in events practice crafts at salon meetings. Joking and laughter contribute to senses of well-being. After events, organizers supply sweet foods and serve green tea harvested from local farms, creating a sense of pride in it as a product. An important feature of the area is that it is quite rural and there is enough land for residents to grow a range of vegetables and, importantly, giving them something to share with one another. Networks of informal reciprocity are created, and it is a part of the genius of social life in Kawanehonchō that there is a term for this, *otagaisama*, 'being in the same boat.' Men like to develop these networks via participation in games of quoits and ground golf, less taxing than full-scale golf courses. At some sites, a hot spring is nearby and is a favorite amenity. Seniors are taught exercises by managers, and the authors did not observe any obese people. Medical services are made available without charge. People are encouraged to stay in touch with one another by special local telephones, and these phones can be used free of charge. People need not feel lonely or neglected. Neighborly behavior is the norm. Another norm is to help people feel *sumiyo*, 'comfortable.'

Kawanehonchō residents realize that they live in a 'welfare town' designed for seniors who are retired and still need to have *ikigai*. As the residents themselves note, what is missing is a cohort of younger people. Young people like to go out to cities for employment and urban lifestyles. Counterbalancing to some extent this migratory outflow there is a flow of adults who like to come back and live a 'slower life,' one not so rushed by the imperatives of bigger cities.

Kawanehonchō serves as a useful potential model for other parts of the world, for example the USA. The authors themselves draw attention to this possibility. Reading this admirably perceptive study, however, brings to mind how much of all this depends on local ecology and history, and even more, in the last analysis, on that pervasive element, 'Japanese culture.'

We applaud this excellent, factual, thoughtful, and timely study for a world in which the needs of its seniors are becoming more evident as average life spans increase. Over this situation, however, falls a dark shadow, the global

threat of the coronavirus (2019–2021). The authors take note of this, recognizing that for the future the conditions in which seniors can flourish in Kawanehonchō and throughout the world are potentially threatened. Anthropologists have long noted with regret the passing of ‘traditional’ cultures. Now we may be facing a threat to core features of cultures in general on a global scale unless the virus can be brought under control.

Birch Research Unit  
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#### Note

(\*) Pamela J. Stewart (Strathern) and Andrew J. Strathern are a wife-and-husband research team who are based in the Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh, and co-direct the Cromie Burn Research Unit. They are frequently invited international lecturers and have worked with numbers of museums to assist them with their collections. Stewart and Strathern have published over 50 books; 80+ Prefaces for books; and over 200 articles, book chapters, and essays on their research in the Pacific (mainly Papua New Guinea and the South-West Pacific region, e.g., Samoa and Fiji); Asia (mainly Taiwan, and also including Mainland China and Inner Mongolia, and Japan); and Europe (primarily Scotland, Ireland, Germany and the European Union countries in general); and also New Zealand and Australia. Their most recent co-authored books include *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip* (Cambridge University Press, 2004); *Kinship in Action: Self and Group* (Routledge Publishing, 2016, originally published 2011); *Peace-Making and the Imagination: Papua New Guinea Perspectives* (University of Queensland Press with Penguin Australia, 2011); *Ritual: Key Concepts in Religion* (Bloomsbury Academic Publications, 2014); *Working in the Field: Anthropological Experiences Across the World* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); *Breaking the Frames: Anthropological Conundrums* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); *Diaspora, Disasters, and the Cosmos: Rituals and Images* (Carolina Academic Press, 2018); *Sustainability, Conservation, and Creativity: Ethnographic Learning from Small-scale Practices* (Routledge Publishing, 2019); *Language*

and *Culture in Dialogue* (Bloomsbury Academic Publishing, 2019); *Sacred Revenge in Oceania* (Cambridge University Press, 2019) and *Heritage, Ritual, Tradition and Contestation* (Carolina Academic Press, 2021, forthcoming).

Their recent co-edited books include *Research Companion to Anthropology* (Routledge Publishing, (2016, originally published 2015); *Exchange and Sacrifice* (Carolina Academic Press, 2008); and *Religious and Ritual Change: Cosmologies and Histories* (Carolina Academic Press, 2009); and the Updated and Revised Chinese version: Taipei, Taiwan: Linking Publishing, 2010; *Dealing with Disasters—Perspectives from Eco-Cosmologies* [along with Diana Riboli and Davide Torri] (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); and *The Palgrave Handbook of Anthropological Ritual Studies* (Palgrave Macmillan, under contract and submitted [2021]).

Stewart and Strathern's current research includes the topics of Eco-Cosmological Landscapes; Ritual Studies; Political Peace-Making; Comparative Anthropological Studies of Disasters and Climatic Change; Language, Culture and Cognitive Science; and Scottish and Irish Studies. For many years they served as Associate Editor and General Editor (respectively) for the *Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania* book series and they are Co-Series Editors for the *Anthropology and Cultural History in Asia and the Indo-Pacific* book series. They also currently co-edit four book series: *Ritual Studies*, *Medical Anthropology*, *European Anthropology*, and *Disaster Anthropology*, and they are the long-standing Co-Editors of the *Journal of Ritual Studies* [Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/ritualstudies>]. Their webpages, listing publications and other scholarly activities, are: <http://www.pitt.edu/~strather/> and <http://www.StewartStrathern.pitt.edu/>.

An extended Biographical Sketch can be found at <https://cap-press.com/pdf/9781611633986.pdf>.

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The authors want to thank their sources of professional and social support, without which this book could not have been written.

First, we thank the series editors, Andrew Strathern and Pamela Stewart, and the people at Carolina Academic Press, including Ryland Bowman and Susan Trimble, who made it possible for us to publish this work.

When Dr. Tanaka was a graduate student, she read “The Practice of Concern,” by John W. Traphagan and hoped to publish a book on Japanese culture in the same series with his publisher. Her goal has now been reached.

We are grateful to Dr. Tanaka’s employer, James Madison University, for a 2015 Department Summer Research Grant and the 2016 College of Liberal Arts Leave Program that funded her costs in travelling to, and collecting data in Kawanehonchō, Japan. Special salutes go to Mayor Toshio Suzuki and to the staff of the Kawanehonchō municipal welfare office and Kawanehonchō Council of Social Welfare (KCSW). The staff welcomed her with kindness to observe their facilities and provided resources to help her learn more about the programs. We appreciate the warm welcome and generous support extended to Dr. Tanaka by the residents of Kawanehonchō, too numerous to name. They kindly introduced her to key informants and took her for trips around the town and its suburbs. It helped us to understand why people move back to Kawanehonchō or move there for the first time.

While much of the data were collected on site by Dr. Tanaka, our study benefited from our access to secondary data. We gratefully acknowledge the Shizuokaken Sogō Kenkō Center for providing data through the Kawanehonchō municipal welfare office and the Mitsubishi Research Institute, Inc., for data through the Social Science Data Archive at the University of Tokyo.

Kimiko Tanaka thanks her daughters (Hillary Keiko and Irene Toshie, who were ages six and one at the beginning of this six year project), her spouse (Jamison Toshio Arimoto), her parents (Toshio and Keiko Tanaka), Mihoko Konishi (her grandmother), and Masako Tatebayashi (her great-aunt). Their continuous encouragement and support helped her balance her life as a mother and scholar. In addition, she thanks Nan E. Johnson for over 15 years of mentorship and friendship. At their first meeting at Michigan State University, she told Dr. Johnson of her goal of publishing a book about Japan. We are honored that we could work together to reach that goal.

Nan E. Johnson has previously studied the health status and health care received by older adults in the rural United States. She thanks Kimiko Tanaka for the opportunity to learn about elderly people in rural Japan through their collaboration on this book. Finally, Dr. Johnson appreciates having access to an office and other research supports at Michigan State University.

# Introduction

In 1900, only 14 percent of the world's population lived in urban places, but it increased to an estimated 56 percent (4.4 billion) by 2020 (Kinsella 2001; United Nations 2014; Satterthwaite 2020). Since World War Two, the pace of urbanization has increased in the developing world due to net rural-to-urban migration and is now faster than in the developed world. Even so, the percentage of the elderly population is greater in rural than in urban areas in both the lesser developed and the more developed nations of the world (Kinsella 2001). Such a skewed age structure caused by net outmigration of young people to urban areas in search of opportunities for education and jobs has led to the stagnation of small and medium-sized towns (Kinsella 2001).

The rural elderly are vulnerable in both health status and access to health-care services (Elnitsky and Alexy 1998; Kumar et al. 2001). In geographically isolated rural communities, low-density and dispersed populations created problems for the elderly in regards to service provision, personal mobility, and maintaining social connections (Walsh et al. 2012). In addition to geographical barriers and poorer access to health and emergency services, in comparison to urban seniors, rural seniors are considered disadvantaged in regards to having lower incomes and less education (Bacsu et al. 2014; Kumar et al. 2001). However, such disadvantages and vulnerabilities do not necessarily lead to negative health outcomes for the elderly living in rural areas.

As this book shows, words such as “rural” and “depopulation” do not simply equate with negative outcomes for the elderly. Some studies in the U.S. pointed out that negative health outcomes for the elderly living in rural areas are due to low socioeconomic status, poverty, and a lack of access to better health care. This book will illustrate that the social quality of a community at the micro and macro levels can buffer the negative effects of rurality on the well-being of the elderly. Critics have shown that the diversity among rural

towns and villages, as created by environmental and industrial differences, makes it impossible for all of them to be uniformly compared to urban cities (Davis et al. 2012; Miller, Stokes, and Clifford 1987). As Davis et al. (2012) wrote: “Myths and stereotypes are often founded on small fragments of truth. Ageing in rural communities is subjected to many such myths that underpin some of the understandings held about rural living” (344). Despite the tendency of people to assume that rural communities are homogeneous, traditional, and faced with the challenges of net outmigration to cities, each rural town seeks its own way of revitalization and of support to the healthy living of the elderly. Due to particularities of geography, culture, and history, outcomes of dramatic population changes throughout the post-Second World War era are different for each locale, and how each municipal government implements policies is strongly influenced by local values and history (Matanle and Rausch 2011). Statistics are important in capturing patterns and successes of policies at the macro (supra-individual) level; but to understand successful aging in rural communities, it is crucial to conduct case studies at the micro (individual) level with qualitative methods to obtain self-reports from the elders in a vibrant rural community. Through understanding complexity and particularity of the locale, we aim to provide comparative and global understanding of rural aging.

Kawanehonchō in Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan, is such a community. Based on its significant population decrease and aging, the national government in Tokyo considered this town to be “endangered.” “Rural” is often stereotyped as remote, poor, and depopulated. Kawanehonchō is located in a remote area, where 90 percent of the land is forested. There are no hospitals offering tertiary care, and no one would expect Kawanehonchō to have one of the longest healthy life expectancies in Japan and in the world (for further discussion, see Chapter 2). Kawanehonchō highlights the importance of the social quality of the community in achieving healthy aging, regardless of socioeconomic status, geographical remoteness, and lack of advanced medical technology.

In comparison to other rural communities studied in the United States (see Brown and Glasgow 2008), this study uses observations, face-to-face interviews, and surveys to find how elderly people in a rural community in Japan (Kawanehonchō) age successfully. The findings are important for other nations and communities, since aging and rural depopulation are global demographic trends. As the U.S. is aging rapidly, and as there are ever-increas-

ing numbers of rural elderly people wishing to “age in place,” this book will give a comparative example of the importance of community to healthy aging. Programs the research sites offer for the elderly provide applicable examples to promote healthy aging in rural areas of other nations. The findings will provoke discussions on the roles of population aging, rural sociology, and community development.

Finally, in understanding rural aging, it is also important look at issues of migration. What could motivate older rural adults to decide not to migrate (i.e., to age in place) or else to migrate to another rural county rather than to an urban county? Facing the relatively greater dearth of medical care in rural (than urban) America, older rural adults might choose to age in place if they can avail themselves of telehealth, “the use of telecommunications and computer technologies to make a broad spectrum of health-related services and information available to populations with limited access” (Grigsby and Goetz, 2004, 237). Because of the ongoing closures of rural hospitals in the U.S., access to face-to-face consultations with local physicians who can prescribe medications and interpret X-rays are becoming more limited. A nurse practitioner or a physician’s assistant at a rural health clinic can provide simple primary care and contact an urban physician to prescribe medications. If the rural county can afford broadband internet service, then a local medical clinic can make and transmit an X-ray electronically to an urban hospital having a radiologist who can interpret the results. This study addresses why the elderly continue to stay in Kawanehonchō despite a lack of advanced hospitals and the possibility of migration in repopulating the rural depopulated towns in Japan.

Population aging and rural depopulation are serious problems especially for such Asian nations as Japan and South Korea, as well as for European nations such as Germany, Austria, Spain, Italy, and Greece (Hewitt 2004). Studies predict a decrease in Europe’s rural population from 100 million to 75 million from 2000 to 2030. However, they also predict that the proportion of older people in rural places will grow due to out-migration of the young and in-migration of retirees (Burholt and Dobbs 2012; Baernholdt et al. 2012). This question is equally important to other nations including the U.S., Australia, and China, where studies found rural-urban disparities in health characteristics (Blazer et al. 1995; Ziersch et al. 2009; Norstrand and Xu 2012; McLaughlin, Stokes, and Nonoyama 2001; Elnitsky and Alexy 1998; Bacsu et

al. 2014). The aging of the Baby Boomers (born in 1946–64) in the U.S. has raised various political debates in regards to the ability of continuing to pay for Social Security and Medicare at current benefit levels, to the lack of professional caregivers, and to the heavy family burden in providing care for the elderly (Pillemer and Glasgow 2000). The findings of our study will be important for other nations and communities, since aging and rural depopulation are global demographic trends (Kinsella 2001). Because Japan has one of the highest life expectancies in the world, it provides a natural laboratory in which to pursue answers to our research questions.

The plan of the book is as follows: In Chapter 1, we describe how rural Japan has changed socially and demographically. We explain how rural depopulation has led to political consolidation, and how the welfare system in Japan is placing more responsibility and autonomy on the municipalities. Some rural towns in Japan, such as Kawanehonchō, are actively responding to the demographic challenges initiated by municipal governments that have the advantage of developing unique programs reflecting the voices of local residents. Chapter 2 describes Kawanehonchō, explains how it became a rural depopulated town, and discusses why the town provides an important example to understand and discuss rural aging comparatively. In Chapter 3, we review theoretical frameworks (collective efficacy theory and social capital) to understand the inseparability of successful aging from the quality of neighborhoods and communities. We explain our research methods in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5, we examine Kawanehonchō with secondary data. Chapter 6 summarizes the findings based on observations of activities provided for the elderly in this town, and Chapter 7 sheds light on rural aging through the eyes and words of its leaders. Chapter 8 presents our findings from our survey of elders participating in two community programs developed locally and specifically for them. Finally, in Chapter 9, we discuss the possibility of net immigration of older adults to Kawanehonchō, and Chapter 10 includes discussions on challenges in rural depopulation and healthy aging.