

So Is it Respect for 'the Aged,' 'the Elderly' or 'the Seniors'?

By Peter Backhaus, The Japan Times

As it is every September, people in Japan are looking forward to keirō no hi, the coming national holiday dedicated to the older members of the population. Respect for the Aged Day provides an annual opportunity to visit one's elderly relatives, get involved in various welfare activities or just stay home in bed and rest.

Given that more than 21 percent of Japan's population is 65 years or older, it seems reasonable to have something like Respect for the Aged Day. The origins of this holiday, however, date back to when Japan's population was much younger than it is today, and when the holiday had another name.

On Sept. 15, 1947, a small town in Hyogo Prefecture first celebrated a day for the elderly, then called otoshiyori no hi ("day of the elderly"). In the following years, similar festivities were held in other communities throughout Japan until, in 1963, Sept. 15 was officially established as rōjin no hi ("day of the old people"). It settled to its present name, keirō no hi, only after the government declared it a national holiday in 1966.

One reason for this terminological confusion lies in the negative connotation often associated with words referring to old age. This is apparent with the word rōjin. While rōjin in the past has been a relatively neutral expression referring to elderly people, in recent times it has increasingly become associated with the weaknesses and frailties of old age. This is reflected in terms such as rōjin mondai ("problems with old people") or rōjin boke, a derogatory term for senility.

And so various alternatives have emerged to replace the unpopular rōjin. The most common of them is kōreisha. Literally meaning "person(s) of high age," it has so far managed to retain a neutral image. Another alternative is the previously mentioned toshiyori (person/people of advanced age), often used with a respectful o- attached before it.

The terminology of old age has been further enriched by new words. Best known are jukunen and jitsunen. The former literally means "mature years" and it first gained currency in the second half of the 1970s. Jitsunen literally means "true years" and is a more recent coinage. It was introduced by the Ministry of Health and Welfare in 1985 to refer to people in their 50s and 60s, but failed to take root in everyday language.

And then there are the usual suspects: English loanwords. A popular one is shirubā ("silver"), as used in shirubā shīto ("silver seat"), train and bus seats

reserved for elderly people. "Silver seat" made its national debut on the Chuo Line on Sept. 15 — keirō no hi — 1973. They were later renamed yūsen seki ("priority seat"), which is now most widely used.

One problem with the term shirubā is that it is frequently associated with welfare, and also with old-age problems, rather than with the more positive aspects of old age. A more neutral term is shinia ("senior"). It allows for expressions such as shinia-tachi ("seniors"), shinia-sō ("senior population") and shinia-sedai ("senior generation").

The reason behind the emergence of such creative vocabulary referring to old age can best be understood in light of Japan's rapidly aging population. With the average life expectancy rising from around 45 years in the 1920s to 78 years for men and 85 years for women now, it stands to reason to assume that perceptions on what it means to be "old" are changing.

Take again the term rōjin. The Hakuodo Institute of Life and Living asked more than 1,500 elderly citizens living in the Tokyo metropolitan area, "from what age on does one become a rōjin?" The surveys taken in 1986 and 1996 reveal that the commonly perceived age of acquiring rōjin status is on the rise. The period most frequently identified in both surveys was between 70 and 74, with 49 percent responding so in 1986, and 41 percent 10 years later. A comparison of the results from the two surveys reveals that the rate of people identifying the beginning of the rōjin age group to be below 75 is dropping, while the number of people who consider it to start later than that is growing. Overall, the average age at which people think one becomes a rōjin rose by more than two years, from 71.5 years in 1986 to 73.6 years in 1996.

Problems on how to properly refer to older people thus reflect the rapid changes in Japan's demography. With life expectancy on the rise, entry into old age is being postponed. The one thing that seems to be sure — and this is the good news — is that there will be many more days of respect for the elderly in the years to come. Whatever name they may go by.

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Courtesy: <http://www.globalaging.org/elderrights/world/2008/respect.htm>