Article

Shut-In Abroad: Social Incapacitation Among Low-Income Male Japanese Retirees in Thailand

Mika Toyota

Abstract
Increasing numbers of low-income single male retirees from Japan are migrating to Southeast Asian countries to live in isolation. They migrate to avoid the emotional burdens in Japan associated with an acute sense of shame, inferiority and displacement. This article argues that their migration should be understood as a type of anticipatory action taken by the retirees—that is, an action driven by the awareness of one's own social incapability, particularly the lack of social relations and self-esteem—to create a meaningful future in Japan. I demonstrate how the men became socially incapacitated through events in their life course, focusing on the dominant work regime, family regime and gender ideology in post-war Japan. The concept of "social incapacitation" contributes to the study of aging futures by foregrounding the significance of gendered norms and emotion, as well as demonstrating how history and futures are interlinked in embodied ways.

Keywords
international retirement migration, social isolation, aging, masculinity, lonely deaths, Thailand, shut-in abroad: social incapacitation among low-income unmarried male Japanese retirees in Thailand

[1]Max-Planck-Institute for Human Development, Berlin, Germany

Corresponding Author:
Mika Toyota, Max-Planck-Institute for Human Development, Lentzeallee 94, Berlin 14195, Germany.
Email: toyota@mpib-berlin.mpg.de

Introduction

In 2016, the Japanese consulate in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand, recorded 38 deaths of Japanese long-term residents, a sharp increase from 13 in 2004. These deaths occurred amongst a community of 3318 registered Japanese in and around Chiang Mai. In more than half of the cases, the deceased died in isolation and the deaths remained unnoticed for a number of days. This is a growing phenomenon known as *kodoku-shi* (literally lonely death) in Japanese. The deceased had secluded themselves, not only from relatives in Japan, but also, from anyone in Thailand, a condition colloquially referred to as *sotokomori* (shut-in abroad). Their prolonged social isolation has effects even after death. Despite Japan's meticulous century-old family records system, the Japanese consulate faced great difficulties in contacting family members as some of the retirees had not contacted their relatives for a long time. Even after relatives in Japan were identified, some refused to be involved on the grounds that the relationship had been distant. In one case, the corpse was left for two months at a hospital in Chiang Mai because, without written consent from family members of the deceased, cremation cannot be carried out. Although no precise information is available across Southeast Asia, my previous research on Japanese retirees in Southeast Asia, carried out since the early 2000s, indicates that these incidents could extend beyond Thailand (Toyota, 2006; Toyota & Thang, 2017).

I argue that "shut-in abroad" should be understood as a particular type of anticipatory action taken by the retirees. Their migration is driven by their lack of social capabilities—particularly with respect to social relations and self-esteem—to create a meaningful future in Japan after retirement. The most significant finding from my field research is that the men lack basic relations in Japan through which they can seek practical help and emotional support. This makes them exceedingly anxious when anticipating the future. Furthermore, their lack of confidence, and the overwhelming sense of shame that they experienced, make the very limited social relations that they do have (i.e., kin) a burden rather than a resource. Emigration frees them from such emotional burden.

Thailand—their destination country—does not provide a bright future though. By living in isolation in an alien environment, the male retirees do not engage with people in the present and furthermore "suspend" their anticipation and concerns about the future (for a recent theorical discussion on migration as a form of suspension, see Xiang, 2021). They chose to migrate to Thailand because they thought that the living cost is cheap, the climate is warm, and the people are friendly and do not judge. Yamamoto, one of my key informants who is shut-in abroad, noted that "if I were in Japan sitting in the park during the daytime, people may look at me suspiciously. Whereas here in Thailand, people are generous and relaxed. They would not mind and would even smile at me." Language barrier was not seen as a problem as it created "natural" distance.[1] Low-status men from the Global North, including from Japan, often feel empowered in countries like Thailand, which "compensate" for their marginal positioning in domestic society. But those who shut themselves in prefer

solitude to benefits from interactions. They do not actively contribute to, nor do they exploit, the local society.

I call this "social incapacitation." Capabilities, according to Amartya Sen, are what people are actually able to be and do. Capabilities include access to resources, agency (capacity to make free choices), and functions (achievements, or "the various things a person may value doing or being" (Sen, 1999, p. 75). More specific manifestations of capabilities include confidence, knowledge, and the actual ability to pursue desirable lives and take part in political decisions. Future-oriented aspiration is another important capability. Appadurai (2013) stressed that people always come to view and deal with the future by resorting to their cultural repertoires and resources. Bunnell et al. (2017) have developed the idea of "how the future is engaged as part of people's everyday lives and cultural imaginaries." They suggest that "aspirational futures are rendered amenable to calculation and strategic action in relation to available economic resources, social capital, or even issues of cosmological alignment" (Bunnell et al., 2017, p. 5). One's economic resources, social capital, and cosmological visions (which are almost always related to self-perceptions) are all part of social capabilities. These are what the *sotokomori* migrants lack.

Social incapacitation differs from precarity, marginality or exclusion, which respectively means the lack of security, material resources, and full entitlement. Social incapacitation emphasizes the loss of capabilities to enact futures for oneself, which is not determined by status or resources. A wealthy person can be socially incapacitated if he/she has low esteem or is isolated. Retiree migrants' socioeconomic precariousness has attracted wide attention among migration scholars (e.g., Botterill, 2017; Lafferty & Maher, 2020; Sunanta, 2020). The escalation of population aging, the decline of state welfare provisions, and economic uncertainties have pushed increasing numbers of low-income retirees to migrate for survival rather than to pursue luxurious lifestyles (Bender et al., 2018; Croucher, 2009; Duangkaew, 2016; Green, 2013; Hayes, 2021; Ormond & Toyota, 2016 Toyota & Thang, 2017). More specifically, for example, Botterill demonstrated how British retirees in Thailand suffer from unanticipated post-migration difficulties, such as frozen pensions, high health care costs and property insecurity in relation to state policies. Lafferty and Maher (2020) illustrated how Western male migrants in Thailand, who had been privileged, became dependant on their Thai partners over time and lose control in intimate relationships. "Shut-in abroad" is part of this trend, but its causes are more complex. The Japanese men who isolate themselves while overseas are poor but not destitute. They have access to basic means of subsistence[2] and are able to take international flights. Furthermore, they are more economically resourceful than their female counterparts in Japan. Very few Japanese women withdraw themselves from society at a late stage of life. The low-income men are not simply short of money; they are short of the capabilities to enact desirable futures for themselves after retirement. If marginality or precarity are about relations between the self and other social groups, social incapacitation is to a great extent about a person's relation to the self. As such, social incapacitation has a strong emotive dimension, evoking the feeling of shame in particular. The emotion of "shame," as Elias

has demonstrated, emerged during the state-building of early modern Europe (Elias, 2000). Frevert has also observed that "emotions are themselves products of history" (Frevert, 2016, p. 62). In other words, we are historically *made* to feel ashamed.

But the concept of social incapacitation does not imply that personal characteristics and mental status are the main causes of this type of migration. Capabilities are socially and historically formed. I dispute the interpretation of *sotokomori* as an act of "strategic marginalisation," namely, that migrants deliberately eschew contacts in order to avoid restraints and interference (Takeuchi, 2012). My long-term field research suggests that the men's withdrawal is structurally forced. But shutting oneself in does appear to be a voluntary "choice." This is because the structural forces work across a long period of time and are often invisible. Bourdieu (1986) conceptualized social relations as "social capital" precisely because it takes time, often across generations, to accumulate the type of social relations that would benefit the actor in an invisible way. The Japanese men did not lose their social capabilities accidentally; they were *actively incapacitated* by concrete political economy events through their life course. This is what this article focuses on, namely, the social and historical origin of *sotokomori,* which I will reveal through discussing the concept of social incapacitation.

The remainder of the article is structured in the following way. After a note about research methods, I point out the gender and emotive specificities of elderlies' shut-in abroad. I suggest that these specificities need to be explained through the conditions of their life history. This is followed by three sections that trace how low-income un-married male retiree migrants were socially incapacitated by the work regime, family norms and gender ideologies that were critical to Japan's post WWII development.

Methods: Researching the Withdrawn

Research on social withdrawal among older migrants poses special methodological challenges. Those withdrawn from society are difficult to contact, let alone interview. Most of existing research on Japanese retirees in Southeast Asian countries, including some of my own, has heavily relied on the networks of Japanese associations as the primary information source (e.g., Chamchan & Soparat, 2012; Fukahori, et al., 2011; Masui, 2017; Miyashita, et al., 2017; Ono, 2015; Shakuto, 2019; Takeuchi, 2012; Ueno, 2015). This sampling strategy has its limit as the associations represent a small portion of Japanese retirees. Those who live in isolation by definition cannot be reached in this way.

In order to address these challenges in field research, I adopted two strategies. First, I collected qualitative data about older migrants' social incapacitation indirectly from other Japanese retirees who participate in social activities designed for Japanese residents in Thailand. Withdrawal spans a wide spectrum of behavior among male Japanese retirees; many respondents who lead largely normal lives share concerns similar to those who have completely withdrawn. Much of my data was collected through three projects over 10 years: a mapping exercise on Japanese retirees in Southeast Asia (2005–2008); a project on gender and later-life migration (2007–2010);

and research on transnational care among retirement migrants (2013–2015). Through these projects, I carried out in-depth interviews with a total of 48 Japanese retirees, aged 50–87 years old. These interviews enabled me to appreciate the contexts under which the men were socially incapacitated in Japan.

Second, during my last project (2019) I consciously approached Japanese retirees who withdrew from the community. I did so by visiting places where places frequented by these retirees, such as cheap Japanese noodle stalls, which have ballooned in Chiang Mai since the 2000s and serve as the main place where poor Japanese retirees have their meals; air-conditioned shopping malls, where some Japanese men linger for hours in the afternoon to enjoy the free cool air; and low-cost Thai language schools. In these places I initiated conversations whenever appropriate. I also tapped on my contacts with Thai residents in Chiang Mai, which I had developed in the 1990s during doctoral field research, to look for Japanese who live in isolation. I found two interviewees through their Thai neighbors. Although these encounters did not lead to in-depth interviews, visiting these places and their residences provided me with glimpses into what their life was like. For instance, I observed that Japanese older men in a noodle stall always sat away from one another and never talked during a meal. In the residence of a Japanese man who was married to a Thai resident, I saw the room where he spent 24 hours a day: a bed; a table where he had all of his meals; a TV set that was connected to Japanese channels; piles of VCDs of Japanese dramas; Japanese video games, and a headphone set that shut him off from surrounding sounds.

Six retirees provided particularly detailed information, which provided the main source of data for this article. Our in-depth interviews were conducted in Japanese. Each lasted an average of 90 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured, guided by broad questions about their life story. I asked them to identify key turning points in their life and major changes that they experienced after retirement and migration. In this article, pseudonyms are given to all individuals in order to protect their privacy. Emerging from interview transcriptions are four salient themes that many other respondents mentioned, which are early rural-urban migration experiences, work relations, family relations, and gender ideology.

Social Incapacitation as Gendered and Emotive Processes

Shut-in abroad among the Japanese is highly gendered. Most of the known *sotokomori* cases in Thailand happened amongst low-income men.[3] According to the most recent *kodoku-shi* report (2020), 83 percent of all reported *kodoku-shi* in Japan were male, as compared to 17 percent of female cases (*n* = 4448). This is a remarkable imbalance given that, first, women have a longer life expectancy, and secondly that women make up 69 percent of all older people who live alone as compared to 31 percent for men (Ministry of Interior of Japan, 2016).

Shut-in abroad is an extension of the phenomenon of shut-in at home, or the *hikikomori* symptom, which is also very male-dominated.[4] The Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare defines a *hikikomori* as a person who has not left the home

or interacted with others for six months or longer. Previously assumed to be specific young male adults (the dictionary defines *hikikomori* as "the abnormal avoidance of social contact, typically by adolescent males"), *hikikomori* is fast spreading among older age groups. In 2018, the first nationwide survey about middle-aged *hikikomori* identified at least 613,000 aged between 40 and 64 who suffered from *hikikomori*. This group is larger than the younger-age *hikikomori* (ages 15–39), at 541,000. The survey found that retirement is a critical turning point that triggers *hikikomori*: 60 percent of the surveyed population developed the symptom then. Similar to the younger group, the middle-aged *hikikomori* is male dominated, with 76.6 percent being men.

Shut-in abroad or at home has a strong psychological and emotive aspect. When asked why men are so much more likely than women migrate into seclusion, the answers are often that the "men don't have friends [in Japan]"; the men "don't know who to talk to people in Thailand"; they are "too shy," "awkward," or "don't have confidence in mingling with people." "Shame" is considered an important factor in understanding the psychopathological mechanisms of *hikikomori* (Kitayama, 1998). Many of my informants implied a sense of personal failing, feeling of inadequacy and disappointment. They are ashamed of the fact that they could not live up to their own expectations, the ideal self-image despite their long-term efforts and painful working life experiences.

Why are men more likely to be socially incapacitated, that is, becoming deprived of basic social relations and self-confidence? This must be understood through history. First, the current prevalent normative ideas what a man should be—what a man should be proud of and what one should be ashamed of—was developed as part of the modern nation building project since the late 19th century (Hidaka, 2010). Second, as we shall see below, various events in their life history prevented them from developing their social capabilities. Although the men's low-income, low-education and rural origin play a decisive role, it is through individual life history that class positioning translates into actual embodied capabilities. I will now turn to disentangling the historical causes of the men's social incapacitation.

Social Incapacitation as a Legacy of the Anti-Social Work Regime

Many low-income Japanese male retirees in Thailand, including four out of the six key informants of this article, migrated from the countryside to cities in the 1960s and 1970s. Their post-retirement life is profoundly shaped by what I call an "anti-social work regime" that dominated their working life. The "anti-social work regime" refers to the arrangement of wage work that provided employees long-term job security, but allowed little freedom or capacity for developing social networks because of long working hours, an encapsulating dormitory system, and the workers' particular migration experiences. The intensive work regime and masculinity are inextricably linked in post-war Japan (Cook, 2013). In the post-war decades, the "salaryman masculinity" and the salary man-centered nuclear family became the hegemonic blueprint to signify the ideal citizen. (Dasgupta, 2017, p. 39) Despite the fact that "only a minority of

Japanese men would have fallen within the strictest definition parameters of the category of 'salaryman' – full-time white-collar permanent employees" (Dasgupta, 2017, p. 36), the social expectation that men should be responsible breadwinners for the entire family is prevalent (Mackie, 2002).

Mr. Yamamoto, born in 1951 in the agricultural prefecture of Akita, moved to Tokyo in 1966 at the age of 16. He was part of the mass recruitment initiative organized by the government. At that time, the Japanese economy was booming, large companies were absorbing college graduates from cities, and the low-end manufacturing sector badly needed manual labor from the countryside. The Ministry of Labour in Japan organized so-called "mass recruitment trains" (*shudan shyushoku*): chartered trains that ran across the country to recruit young workers *en masse* from the countryside for manual jobs in cities. The recruitment targeted students who had just finished middle or high school, mostly aged between 15 and 18. These workers from rural Japan were called "golden eggs" at the time because they were young, cheap, hardworking and docile. The migrants had no prior work experience in their hometowns, they had hardly any prior knowledge of the destination but they longed for urban life. The school teachers would recommend the work placement and the students simply followed the arrangements. Furthermore, the recruits' peers were likely to be sent to other cities. This left migrants with rather limited social networks beyond their immediate families, which created a decisive rupture in their lives.

I asked how frequently Yamamoto visited his hometown, as a physical visit was then the main way for his generation to maintain social ties then. "It was costly and time-consuming to go back to [my] hometown," he said. "I did not go back unless it was absolutely necessary." Few of the youths managed to sustain frequent social visits to their rural origin. Following the patrilineal system in Japan, only the oldest son of the family had the privilege to inherit family property. The migration of younger brothers created awkward tensions. The first son may have wanted to go to the city but had to remain in the countryside with his parents, while their younger siblings may have wished to stay home rather than having to go to the big city at such a young age in order to relieve the family of its financial burdens (Kase, 1997, p. 61). It was common for both sides to feel envious and resentful, culminating in cutting off connections from each other. Thus, there is no surprise that Yamamoto declared that "It would be the last choice to go back to my hometown [after retirement]!" For him, the "hometown" is an alien place in the middle of nowhere that suffers from rapid depopulation and offers him nothing.

The young rural workers' post-migration experiences were also distinct. They were picked up by the employer at the rail station or sent to the doorsteps of the factory, and immediately absorbed into the labor market. There was no need for them to search for jobs or accommodation at the destination. Everything was pre-arranged. The work-places where these young recruits worked were small, typically having less than 30 employees. It was not uncommon for the workers to stay with the employer's family (Katase, 2010). Yamamoto recalled:

> "Some of my friends went to heavy-duty jobs, but because my body was too small and skinny, I was dispatched to work for a small Japanese restaurant. It was just a small

restaurant managed by a couple who did not have children. I rented a room near the restaurant. The couple treated me like their son, and I worked hard for them… I had a chance to meet some of my old classmates at an early stage. But later, some got married, others changed jobs, and my classmates became too busy getting on with their own lives."

Yamamoto was closely bound to the employer. The employer, according to him, was a hardworking man and got up early every morning to start working. So, he followed their example. He did not have much free time, but it did not bother him too much—this family-like working environment provided security, and he did not have much spare money to spend. But it also made the employee vulnerable once this working life came to an end. After the owner's death, his wife decided to close the restaurant and Yamamoto had to stop working at the age of 61. As the small family restaurant was the only the place that Yamamoto had ever worked, he did not know where to look for a job. For a man of his age and education level, who had spent all his adult life in one place doing one job, it was too frightening to knock on others' doors to ask for work. Furthermore, he still remembers how he was bullied soon after arriving in Tokyo because of his Akita accent. This also deterred him from reaching out.

Without an income, it became too expensive to continue living in Tokyo. But returning home did not seem feasible: Yamamoto's parents had already passed away, and as the second son, he could not inherit any family property. Within his family circle, he had only been in touch with his sister, who had also gone to the city with the mass recruitment scheme. They had this shared experience, but then his sister returned to the hometown to get married. He did not wish to burden her. He felt, in his words: "I have no place to go back to in Japan." Yamamoto had heard from one of the restaurant customers that Thailand is a Buddhist country, and he assumed that people would be polite to the older adults. He went to Chiang Mai at the age of 63.

The Japanese work regime is socially incapacitating because it impedes social relations across rigid hierarchies even after retirement. Low-income Japanese male retirees tend to keep their distance from more affluent Japanese as their pre-retirement status is a major obstacle for developing solidarity with other Japanese. For example, those who are accustomed to playing golf with business partners during their working age acquired certain social graces and etiquette, but those who did not have similar experiences are less able to do so. Even after retirement Japanese male retirees are rather sensitive about their former job titles and affiliations, information which is quickly circulated among the Japanese social networks. Explaining his decision to migrate, Yamamoto said, "In Japan, I constantly had to worry about what my boss might feel or what other people think. In Thailand, I feel at ease because I no longer have to worrying about what other people think."

The Japanese work regime also prevents solidarity among low-income retirees themselves. Cheap Japanese eateries are one of the very few public spaces that the low-income male retirees regularly visit, but communication between them is minimal. They even avoid eye contact with each other. One of my informants told me that as "losers," everyone holds painful and embarrassing memories; they prefer not to talk

about them and be left alone. This is very similar to what Gill describes as the "homeless etiquette" in Japan whereby "homeless men will avoid using their surname and will also refrain from asking someone else their surname or other personal details." (Gill, 2012, p. 22) They also "deliberately avoid intimate friendships for fear of incurring obligations." (Gill, 2012, p. 10) One of my informants called such mutual avoidance an "un-written courtesy" and warned me to be sensitive when approaching a male retiree.

Social Incapacitation as a Legacy of Family Norms

The social incapacitation that older Japanese men suffer from after retirement can also be traced to the dominant family norm; that proper, responsible men must form a heterosexual family, preferably having multiple children. The man should be the head of the household and the single breadwinner. Those who are unable to do so are regarded as cases of existential failure. Miyazaki, born in 1949, was another "golden egg" from northern Japan. He explained why he could not marry and therefore felt "out of place" in Japan once he retired in 2010. Like the other *sotokomori* migrants mentioned, Miyazaki came to Tokyo to work immediately after high school through the mass recruitment scheme. He was sent to a small factory where he worked most of his life. He had female classmates who were recruited to Tokyo to work in a group at the same time as him. He had considered marriage but he said his female classmates preferred to marry white-collar urban salaried men over manual workers like him from the same rural town.

The low marriage rate among males over 50 in Japan has significantly increased in the last 30 years. According to the latest demographic statistics from the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 5.6 percent of Japanese males were never married at the age of 50 in 1990; the proportion then rose sharply to 12.6 percent (2000), 20.1 percent (2010), and 23.4 percent (2015). It is projected to further increase to 26 percent (2020) and to 29 percent (2035). There is a strong association between one's income level and the likelihood to be married; the lower the income one earns, the lower one's chance of being married (Yamada, 2019).

These men did not marry when they were young, not because marriage was regarded as irrelevant; on the contrary, they could not marry because they failed to meet most women's expectations for desirable husbands. Apart from traditional familism, the Japanese state has actively promoted heteronormative households consisting of full-time working husbands whose salaries are high enough to have full-time "home-making" wives (Harada, 2000). It was envisioned that such a family regime would help maximize male employees' productivity and their dedication to the employer, while minimizing the public cost of social reproduction and maintaining social order. The family regime thus constitutes a critical supplement to Japan's post-war economic development strategy.

The government encouraged this family model primarily by discouraging women's participation in formal full-time employment. First, there was a widespread normative

pressure that women should quit their full-time jobs upon marriage in order to be dedicated to taking care of the family. Second, the government introduced the policy of "spouse tax exemption" in 1961. According to this policy, husbands' income taxes are reduced or even exempted if their wives' incomes are lower than a certain level. This effectively incentivizes married women to avoid seeking high-paid jobs. Although women did work—and, in fact, provided a flexible reserve labor force throughout post-war Japan (Macnaughtan, 2006, p. 36)—they were not supposed to be the main earners in the family. Even after decades of social campaigns for gender equality, the rate of non-regular employment among Japanese women is still higher than that of male workers: 56.1 percent for females, and 22.2 percent for males as of 2018.[5] As a result of unequal economic opportunities between genders, hypergamy became the norm. It is institutionally intended that women should expect their husbands to earn higher incomes than themselves.

The income gap between men and women has been the chief reason why Japan is positioned 120th out of 156 in world gender equality rankings, according to the Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2021). But its low ranking of gender equality does not mean that women in Japan are deprived of opportunities in human development, particularly in education and health. On the contrary, women tend to outperform men in educational achievement and health conditions, which means that women can be highly educated and a small number of them do manage to obtain high-income jobs. They thus have very high expectations about what a desirable family life should be, both materially and culturally. This caused the so-called "marriage squeeze." On one hand, low-income male groups face difficulty in finding a marriage partner; on the other, high-income females are positioned too "high" in the marriage market. The marriage squeeze thus resulted in the sharp increase of non-marriage.

Such a family regime has multiple and far-reaching social implications, particularly on low-income men. Low-income men who fail to establish their own nuclear families internalize a masculine "loser" identity. For instance, Akira, a 72-year-old single man, had a high school education in Okinawa and worked in a small factory most of his life in Osaka. He was not recruited through the mass recruitment scheme but followed an older cousin to find a job in Osaka. He thus had more social connections back home, but constantly felt awkward and out of place in extended family gatherings. A specific custom of Okinawa is that seniors in the family have to offer "red pockets" (monetary gifts) to the young on numerous occasions throughout the year, which was a particularly heavy burden for him. While men like Yamamoto and Miyazaki decided to leave Japan after retirement because they did not have social relations in Tokyo due to their singlehood, Akira felt displaced because he lacked his own nuclear family and was overwhelmed by the expectations from his extended family. All three men ended up in Chiang Mai to spend the final stage of their life.

Social Isolation as the Legacy of "Self-Reliant" Ideology

Finally, the male Japanese retirees are incapacitated by the gender norm that men should be self-reliant and, therefore, refrain from seeking help. My informants attach

great emphasis to self-reliance, and regard it as a core attribute of masculinity, more so than "active aging" or "self-fulfilment." Mr. Yamaguchi decided to leave Japan because he felt he could not be self-reliant. He had difficulties in finding a guarantor's endorsement, which is compulsory for renting a flat, and he thought the only future he had was to emigrate. He explained, "I have always been a man of self-reliance since I was 18 years old. How could I bother to contact my distant relatives asking for help at this stage of my life?... This is why I am here in Thailand."

This obsession about "self-reliance" is also observed among homeless men in Japan—they do not beg because asking for help is considered as "shameful" (Gill, 2012, p. 18). According to an attitude survey of older people living alone conducted in 2014, 35 percent of older males without children reported that they "have nobody to ask for care support," and 22.6 percent of older males without children feel that they "*do not feel like* relying on anybody for care support." Although gendered difference in help-seeking is observed universally (Johnson, 2001; Chan & Hayashi, 2010), among Japanese male, and especially among low-income unmarried male, notions of self-reliance and self-autonomy have become the last bastion of their self-esteem as they look toward their aging futures.

This gender norm has even hindered some retirees in seeking health care. Mr. Watanabe explained why he was reluctant to see doctors in Thailand after his experience in a well-equipped private hospital. "The medical facility here in Thailand is probably better than in Japan. Here the nurses come to visit me very often, to check [my] temperature, clean the room, and bring the food etc. I felt well-treated. But I could not help feeling uneasy because I have to rely on the help of a Japanese translator." His hesitations come from the masculine pride of self-reliance. When I asked how he could lead such a secluded life, Watanabe reminded me of my gender: "You are a woman. You may need to chit-chat with others. But I am a man. I am not afraid of loneliness."

Male retirees also resort to the ideology of self-reliance to present their incapacitation as a sign of dignity and even empowerment. Mr. Yamaguchi in Thailand went to a local bar just once a week. He did not engage in social, let alone sexual, interactions. He took one drink and just watched young women in distance. He presented his experience with a sense of pride, especially by comparing himself to "desperate" Western men:

> I did not know that there are so many old Western men in Chiang Mai. They are really big, not only in body size, but also in attitudes. They speak English and talk to local women at the bar. They speak loudly and are desperate in having close relationships with the bar girls. These big old Western men are lonely and cannot stay alone. I am well-customed to be alone and I do not need to rely on these women.

It is paradoxical that the notion of self-reliance is supposed to empower, but it leads to social incapacitation in the case of the *sotokomori* migrations instead. The reason is this ideology was imposed by a top-down Japanese development model historically and into the present. The system requires Japanese men to be self-reliant and not demand help, rather than the pursuit of self-development. This life-long inculcation turns the

norm into a deeply-ingrained hegemonic "common sense" in the Gramscian sense (Crehan, 2016), which the Japanese retirees emotionally identify with and do not question even as they transition toward aging futures. Thus, emotion and ideology are important mechanisms of social incapacitation.

Conclusion

The future, as the guest editors of the special issue point out, is an object of thought. It is to be anticipated, avoided, prepared for and acted on. As such, a person's social capabilities—social relations and self-esteem, in addition to material resources—are critical in shaping how a person anticipates the future and what anticipatory actions he/she will take accordingly. The socially incapacitated, namely, those who are deprived of basic social relations and confidence, therefore lack social capital as well as emotional energy to embrace the future in a positive way. They may instead develop a fear of the future and decide to run away by migrating. In the destination country, they are even more incapacitated, but while in total isolation they feel free from the emotional burden associated with incapacitation, particularly an acute sense of shame, inferiority, and displacement. The future is suspended. It is because of social incapacitation that low-income Japanese male retirees migrate overseas to shut themselves in, and some even suffer from a lonely death in the end.

This article has traced the historical origin of social incapacitation among the retirees to the accumulated effects of the unbalanced nature of development in post-war Japan, particularly during the high economic growth period (1954–1973). I highlighted three aspects of the development model that have important effects on older people today. First, the encapsulating, anti-social work regime deprived employees of opportunities to develop their social support networks. Second, a highly gendered, supposedly self-sufficient family regime rendered female hypogamy almost a necessity, which puts low-income men in a disadvantaged position and contributed to the high non-marriage rate among low-income men (as well as among high-income women). Third, a gendered ideology stresses self-reliance and discourages sharing personal problems with others, thus exacerbating the tendency of social withdrawal. Non-marriage, social withdrawal and lonely deaths are all clearly gendered.

I hope that the notion of social incapacitation can be applied in analyses on ageing futurity in contexts beyond Japan. In addition to nuancing our appreciation of how structural positioning and the political economy affect people's actual perceptions and actions toward the future, this framework stresses the gendered and emotive dimensions of social incapacitation. Critically, this framework deepens our understanding of the multifaceted effects of history, including how the apparent economic incorporation of low-wage workers during their working life led to post-retirement incapacitation. This framework also lays bare the otherwise invisible structural violence resulting from Japan's post-war development model, which had been widely hailed as a success. Such perspectives are important in anticipating what futures the retirees face worldwide.

Acknowledgments

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. The majority of Japanese retirement migrants face language barriers as they speak neither Thai nor English. Thus, they need to rely on service providers who specifically cater for Japanese migrants.
2. Retirees receive a state pension (about US$ 1100–1300 per month) which is hardly sufficient for living in Japan, but is enough for sustaining a simple single life in Chiang Mai.
3. Kawano (2011) noted that 97% of *sotokomori* cases in Bangkok, Thailand were male.
4. The term "*hikikomori*" has been listed in the Oxford Dictionary since 2010. Initially, it was regarded as a culture-bound syndrome unique to Japan, but recent studies strongly suggested that it exists in many other countries (Kato et al., 2017).
5. The policy has far-reaching and deep-grained impacts on the social fabric of Japan. Since 1997, the number of double-income households became larger than single-income with full-time housewives, and by 2017, double-income households reached 65% compared to single-income households with housewives, 35%. Nevertheless, the wage gap still structurally persists. In 2018, policy revision of tax exemption for spouses has slightly raised the cap, but the fundamental principle for housewives to restrain their income level has been retained.

References

Appadurai, A. (2013). *The future as cultural fact*. Verso

Bender, D., Hollstein, T., & Schweppe, C. (2018). International retirement migration revisited: From amenity seeking to precarity migration? *Transnational Social Review*, *8*(2017), 98–102. https://doi.org/10.1080/21931674.2018.1429080

Botterill, K. (2017). Discordant lifestyle mobilities in East Asia: Privilege and precarity of British retirement in Thailand. *Population, Space and Place*, *23*(5). https://doi.org/1010.1002/psp.2011.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of Capital. In John G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood Press

Bunnell, T., Gillen, J., & Lynn-Ee Ho, E. (2017). The prospect of elsewhere: Engaging the future through aspirations in Asia. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, *108*(1), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2017.1336424

Chamchan, C., & Soparat, O. (2012). Long-stay of the Japanese in Chiangmai: Analysis of the determining factors in the pre- and post-period of the visit. *Japanese Studies Journal*, *29*(1), 16–34. in Thai.

Chan, R. K. H., & Hayashi, K. (2010). Gender roles and help-seeking behaviour: Promoting professional help among Japanese men. *Journal of Social Work*, *10*(3), 243–262. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017310369274

Cook, E. E. (2013). Expectations of failure: Maturity and masculinity for freeters in contemporary Japan. *Social Science Japan Journal*, *16*(1), 29–43. https://doi.org/10.1093/ssjj/jys022

Crehan, K. (2016). *Gramsci's common sense: Inequality and its narratives*. Duke University Press.

Croucher, S. (2009). *The other side of the fence: American migrants in Mexico*. University of Texas Press

Dasgupta, R. (2017). Articulations of salaryman masculinity in Shōwa and post Shōwa Japan. *Asia Pacific Perspectives*, *15*(1), 36-54. https://usfca.edu/center-asia-pacific/perspectives/v15n1/dasgupta.

Duangkaew, S. (2016). *The life-style mobility of Japanese longstay residents in Chiang Mai, Thailand and its impacts*. Ryukyu University. in Japanese

Elias, N. (2000). *The civilizing process: Sociogenetic and psychogenetic investigations*. Blackwell. Original work published 1939

Frevert, U. (2016). The history of emotions. In L.F. Barrett, M. Lewis, & J. M. Haviland-Jones (Eds.), *Handbook of emotions* (pp. 49–65). Guilford Press.

Fukahori, H., Baba, Y., Hioki, F., Monkong, S., Intarasombat, P., & Malathum, P. (2011). Healthcare services for Japanese elderly long-staying in Thailand from the perspective of the patient and healthcare providers: A survey study. *Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics*, *53*(2), e168–e173. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.archger.2010.08.007

Gill, T. (2012). Failed manhood on the streets of urban Japan: The meaning of self-reliance for homeless men. *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, *10*(1), 1-21. https://apjjf.org/2012/10/1/Tom-Gill/3671/article.html.

Green, P. (2013). Contested realities and economic circumstances: British later-life migrants in Malaysia. In M. Janoschka & H. Haas (Eds.), *Contested spatialities, lifestyle migration and residential tourism* (pp. 145–157). Routledge.

Harada, Y. (2000). The birth of "Sengyoshufu" husbands. *Journal of Sociology of Family*, *12*(1), 13–17. (in Japanese). https://doi.org/10.4234/jjoffamilysociology.12.13

Hayes, M. (2021). 'If it were the same, it wouldn't be an adventure': Retirement migration and active ageing in cuenca, Ecuador. *Ageing & Society*, *41*(6), 1221–1239. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0144686x20001154

Hidaka, T. (2010). *Salaryman masculinities: Continuities and change in hegemonic masculinities in Japan*. Brill

Johnson, M. E. (2001). Influence of gender and sex role orientation on help-seeking attitudes. *The Journal of Psychology*, *122*(3), 237–241.

Kase, K. (1997). *Job selection and mass employment of farmers' children 1955–1965*. Aoki Shoten. in Japanese

Katase, K. (2010). The employment en masse of junior high school graduates in Japanese economic growth period. *Journal of Human Informatics*, *15*, 11–28. in Japanese.

Kato, T. A., Shinfuku, N., Sartorius, N., & Kanba, S. (2017). In: N. Okkels, C. B. Kristiansen, & P. Munk-Jørgensen (Eds.), *Mental health and illness in the city, mental health and illness worldwide*. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-2327-9_9.

Kawano, K. (2011). *A* study on actual condition of sotokomori: A case of guest house in Bangkok. Dissertation, Department of Sociology, Hitotsubashi University. in Japanese.

Kitayama, O. (1998). Transience: Its beauty and danger. International Journal of Psycho-Anal*ysis*, *79*(Pt 5), 937–953.

Lafferty, M., & Maher, K. H. (2020). Transnational Intimacy and economic precarity of western men in Northeast Thailand. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *46*(8), 1629–1646. doi: 10.1080/1369183x.2020.1711571.

Mackie, V. (2002). Embodiment, citizenship and social policy in contemporary Japan. In: R. Goodman (Ed.), *Family and social policy in Japan: Anthropological approaches* (pp. 200–229). Cambridge University Press

Macnaughtan, H. (2006). From 'post-war' to 'post-bubble': contemporary issues for Japanese working women. In P. Matanle & W. Lunsing (Eds.), *Perspectives on work, employment and society in Japan* (pp. 31–57). Palgrave Macmillan

Masui, A. (2017). *Support networks emerging to help elderly Japanese living out their lives in Chiang Mai*. The Japan Times

Ministry of Interior of Japan. (2016). White Paper on Ageing Society.

Miyashita, Y., Akaleephan, C., Asgari, N., & Sungyuth, C. (2017). *Cross-border movement of older patients: A descriptive study on health service use of Japanese retirees in Thailand*. Globalization and Health

Ono, M. (2015). Commoditization of lifestyle migration: Japanese retirees in Malaysia. *Mobilities*, *10*(4), 609–627. https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2014.913868

Ormond, M., & Toyota, M. (2016). Confronting economic precariousness through international retirement: Japan's old-age 'economic refugees' and Germany's exported grannies. In M.K. Hannam JillianRickly-Boyd & M. Mostafanezhad (Eds.), *Tourism and leisure mobilities: Politics, work and play* (pp. 134–146). Routledge

Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press

Shakuto, S. (2019). Postwork intimacy: Negotiating romantic partnerships among Japanese retired couples in Malaysia. *American Ethnologist*, *46*(3), 302–312. https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12828

Sunanta, S. (2020). Globalising the Thai 'high-touch' industry: Exports of care and body work and gendered mobilities to and from Thailand. *Journal of Ethnic Migration Studies*, *46*(8), 1543–1561. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183x.2020.1711568

Takeuchi, M. (2012). Living abroad after retirement: A discussion on psychological aspects of Japanese long-term stayers in Thailand. *Multicultural Relations*, *9*, 3–19. (in Japanese).

Toyota, M., (2006). Ageing and transnational householding: Japanese retirees in Southeast Asia. *International Development Planning Review*, *28*(4), 515–531. https:doi.org/10.3828/idpr. 28.4.5

Toyota, M., & Thang, L. L. (2017). Retirees transnational mobility as processes of identity negotiation: The case of Japanese in Southeast Asia. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, *24*(5), 557–572. https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2017.1346509

Ueno, K. (2015). Care strategies among retired Japanese residents in Chiang Mai. *Journal of Welfare Sociology*, *12*, 57–77. (in Japanese).

World Economic Forum. (2021). *Global Gender Gap Report 2021*. https://www.weforum.org/ reports/ab6795a1-960c-42b2-b3d5-587eccda6023

Xiang, B. (2021). Suspension: Seeking agency for change in the hypermobile world. *Pacific Affairs*, *94*(2), 233–250. https://doi.org/10.5509/2021942233

Yamada, M. (2019). *A society without marriage*. Asahi Press. (in Japanese)

Author Biography

Mika Toyota is a Research Scientist at Max Planck Institute for Human Development (Berlin, Germany). Prior to joining Max Planck, she was a Professor, Rikkyo University (Tokyo, Japan) (2012-2020). She worked at National University of Singapore (2002-2012) and at University of Hull, UK (2000-2002). She received a Ph.D. in Southeast Asian Studies from the University of Hull (UK) in 2000.