



## Living national treasure – arts and older people in Japan

By David Cutler

The Baring Foundation

## About the Baring Foundation

The Baring Foundation was established in 1969 as an independent funder. It tackles discrimination and disadvantage through strengthening civil society in the UK and abroad. The arts are one of the Foundation's three funding strands. Since 2010 this has focused on arts and older people. A brief account of this work up to 2015 can be found on our website – 'Getting On'.

## About the author

David Cutler is the Director of the Baring Foundation.

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## Purpose and Summary

The aim of this short account is to give a flavour of a small selection of art work with older people today in Japan. It is largely based on what I was privileged to experience on a study tour in April 2015 organised by the British Council and co-funded by the Baring Foundation and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation – UK Branch. It is a personal sketch, based on limited information, designed to shed light on some inspiring practice, very little of which is currently available to the reader in English. After looking at the context of the world's first super-ageing society and its approach to the arts, the paper gives examples of work in different primary artistic disciplines (though it should be acknowledged that much of the work is multi-art form). I make some closing observations about the work overall.

Richard II – Gold Theatre of Saitama. Photo © Maiko Miyagawa





Ravens, We Shall Load Bullets – Gold Theatre of Saitama. Photo © Maiko Miyagawa

## Context – a Super Ageing, Super Creative Society

Japan has the enviable position of offering its citizens the longest average life spans in the world (excluding Monaco!) at almost 85. One in four of the country is over 65 as compared to around one in six in the UK. Japan's population is a little under double that of the UK. The Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare estimates that the total population will decline from almost 128 million in 2005 to 95 million in 2050. The ageing of the population is caused by a combination of low fertility and immigration along with high life expectancy. The proportion of the population over 65 in 2055 is estimated to rise to 38.8%. These predictions have inevitably caused intense public debate as to what proportion of the population in the future will be in work versus retired.

Demographic changes tend to be relatively predictable and the Japanese government has taken planning for the issue seriously. Their attention goes back to the 1960s when more nursing homes and homes helps were established followed by retirement's benefits doubling in the 1970s and almost free health care. A 'Gold Plan' was introduced in 1989 to expand long term care services. Since 2000, care in Japan is paid through a compulsory insurance system where the individual makes a contribution from the age of 40, along with a generous 50% from the State. Even so, this system is under severe financial strain. Like in the UK, there is a strong emphasis on older people living in their own homes for as long as possible. Day care centres and provision are much more important than in the UK and probably the highest in the world. (400 schools are closed down each year, some of which to become day care facilities). There are significant waiting lists for people wanting to go into residential care.

It is always difficult to comment on social attitudes as an outsider, though respect for seniority (either in age or status) is apparent. Many Japanese would argue that this is declining. There is a view that loneliness is becoming a greater problem in Japan and there was great concern that so many of those who died as a result of the terrible tsunami in 2011 were isolated older people. Older Japanese have lived through profound changes from the Pacific War to American Occupation, the Economic Miracle of the 60's onwards, followed by the Bubble Economy and stagnation.

The incidence of dementia correlates strongly with older age, so Japan has the world's highest proportion of people living with dementia, estimated at around 4.6 million people. The UK has made treatment and support for people living with dementia a priority for the G7, so this is an area of common interest and cooperation between the UK and Japan. Both countries raise awareness through training Dementia Friends or Supporters (a staggering 6 million people have undertaken the training in Japan) and are trying to organise cross-sectoral

support through Dementia Friendly Communities. For instance in Fujinomiya City, 10,000 people have become Dementia Supporters and dementia friendly tourism is being promoted. In the UK it is recognised that such work benefits greatly from the involvement of arts and cultural institutions.

The administration of the arts is rather different in Japan from the UK, with no equivalent of the national Arts Councils organised on an arms' length principle but with a greater role for central Government. Local authorities are also very significant. Budgets are tight in arts institutions and under increasing pressure. Arts organisations are often heavily reliant on state funding.

The state plays a greater role in approving cultural value, such as in the system of official recognition of 'National Treasures' (objects and heritage) and so called 'Living National Treasures' (who actually labour under a much more bureaucratic title), state venerated (older) artists who have achieved mastery in traditional disciplines such as Noh theatre. State emphasis on traditional art forms is greater than in the UK, and likewise the practice of community or participative arts (sometimes called 'workshops' in Japan) less supported. Japan will host the Olympics in 2020 and London's 2012 Games is in many ways seen as a model, including for the involvement of the arts.

## Drama

The Mount Fuji of arts and older people work in Japan is the **Gold Theatre of Saitama**, which must be one of the supreme examples of work in the world. The Saitama Arts Theatre is a major modern complex with four auditoriums as well as 12 rehearsal halls and studios. On appointment, its founding artistic director, Yukio Ninagawa, was by then already one of the most esteemed theatre directors in the world. In 2006 something extraordinary happened for older people's art. Then aged 70, Ninagawa announced that he wanted to 'create a new form of theatre'. He wrote, 'By harnessing the energy of people with a lot of life experience, I thought we could create experimental works that push the boundaries of what a performance could be. The performers themselves are afflicted by numerous problems that face our ageing society, from physical decline to mental issues, so putting on a show involves hard work, but at the same time, the performers have their own remarkable acting style that differs from that of professional actors and produces many poignant moments.'

Ninagawa personally auditioned over 1200 applicants, all 55 or over who had not worked as actors. From these he selected 48 members aged 55 – 80 (no new members have since been appointed to the company). He then spent a year training them. They worked for four hours a day, five days a week. The actors are



Sokerissa! Led by Yuki Aoki. Photo © Hideaki Takamatsu

paid a modest wage. No actors have retired from the company.

This led to the Gold Theatre's first official production the following year. Since then it has staged over ten works. These have included Western classics, such as Shakespeare and Chekhov, modern Japanese drama and pieces specially commissioned from Japanese writers. Unforgettably, our study tour was privileged to see its rehearsal for *Richard II* and was welcomed by Ninagawa. This production is also involving, for the first time, Saitama Art Theatre's company for young actors called, 'Next Theatre.'

Being a member of the Gold Theatre has often been a genuinely life-changing experience for its members. We heard one actor, now aged 76, retell how she had left her husband to move to another part of the country to join. Another aged 88 describe how acting had motivated him to recover from serious paralysis. He also said, 'In a recent performance, 'Ravens, We Shall Load Bullets', for some reason I found it hard to say my lines. Looking back over my life, I remembered witnessing the burnt-out landscape after the Great Tokyo Air Raid when I was 18. This destruction reminded me of a scene in the play, and once I remembered that, my lines came out smoothly. I realised that this was what Mr Ninagawa had meant about making use of our own experiences.' Then to prove his continued powers he recited from memory 'the medicine seller's speech', a traditional actor's exercise!

Oi Bokke Shi



On a much smaller scale, but no less fascinating, is **Oi Bokke Shi** (Ageing Dementia Death). Founded last year in Okayama Prefecture, it explores the connections between care and drama. Work takes place in community settings. It delivers workshops for care workers and seeks to rehabilitate older people using drama. Its founder, **Naoki Sugawara**, is both an actor and care worker. He speaks with profundity on the connections between the two and how they re-enforce each other. 'Being an actor has made me a better care worker and being a care worker has made me a better actor. Older people have great presence'. This has clearly been a source of artistic inspiration for Sugawara who has created a number of exercises around dementia. In a participatory piece he created, the audience and actors searched a shopping street for someone with dementia who had become lost. The piece blurred the line between fiction and real life by using local shopkeepers and an actor whose wife has dementia. Sugawara argues that drama can help a care worker 'be in the moment' with someone living with dementia, rather than challenging and correcting mistaken perceptions, what he calls 'blessing the moment they are living in.'

**Setagaya Public Theatre** is an arts complex in one of Tokyo's wards. One of its producers **Minako Eshi** works on its outreach programme. Workshops are requested by local organisations who describe a problem or issue they face to see how it can be tackled through performance. For the last six years the theatre has been working in care homes. An original production is created over a two week

Ravens, We Shall Load Bullets – Gold Theatre of Saitama. Photo © Maiko Miyagawa





ARDA Workshop. Photo © Shinya Ochida

period and performed twelve times throughout the year involving care home staff as well as professional actors.

A director and workshop facilitator who has used his participative approach in working with older people is **Akira Kashiwagi**, working in Ezuko, Miyagi Prefecture and running what he calls a 'theatre store'. He has worked with the local community for ten years. He began with a fun theatre group for over 60s to which a music group has been added. A performance held annually. A recent piece with older people has been a 'skit' where they make a song of their diseases which has since been performed to medical staff.

## Music and Dance

**Yuki Aoki**, a dancer and choreographer is known in Japan for his pioneering work with homeless people. (Some of these are older men who worked in construction during the Japanese building boom of the 1960s and 70s). He has founded a not for profit group, though, while in search of funding, remains its sole member at the moment. Convinced that all bodies express the life they are going through and anyone can be a dancer, he began working in a day care



Gallery Talk by Arts Alive. Photo courtesy of Yoko Hayashi

centre in Shizouka in 2012, beginning with 13 workshops. He observed how little energy the residents had but by using exercises such as simply responding to a red rose, noticed a new sparkle in their eyes. He has also involved children in a joint workshop.

As well as traditional dance forms such as Butoh, ballroom dancing is popular, particularly among older people. For instance in Akashi, the **Mini Mini Dance Circle**, is just one of several groups for older people. The group is self-supporting, though given a free hall by the local authority and members pay a modest sum for weekly classes with a professional and perform three times per year.

**Satsuki Yoshino** has been running joint composition workshops with older people for fifteen years. This led to a collaboration with **Makoto Nomura** to produce an artistic response to the 2011 tsunami. A 'documentary opera' was created in collaboration with older Japanese who had experienced the Pacific War. Makoto felt 'the clue to how to revive from this disaster seemed to lie in how they revived from the war. Then we visited old people's homes to have an interview with them. We collected their words, facial expressions and gestures, in which we tried to discover their unconscious messages. Through video and photos we created poems, elders and dance.' The result is a beautiful performance piece called *Dango for the Revival*.



Workshop by Arts Alive. Photo courtesy of Yoko Hayashi

## Galleries, Museums and the Visual Arts

Matsumoto has a stunning contemporary museum. It honours its off-spring Yayoi Kusama both with her own gallery and an enormous sculpture by her outside. Still working at 86, Kusama last year was the most popular artist in the world (measured by ticket sales to exhibitions). The same museum for over a decade has held biennial exhibitions of new work by artists aged 70 and over.

**Kitanagoya-shi Historical Museum** is sometimes called the Showa Era Lifestyle Museum. (The Showa Era is the name given to the reign of Emperor Hirohito from 1926 to 1989). Its Director, **Yoshinori Ichihashi**, described how its reminiscence work draws on the example of the Age Exchange Theatre in London and has been the first museum in Japan to take this approach. It is a museum 'where it is difficult for the visitor to remain silent' as everyday objects prompt excited memories. The museum created the 'Shikatsu Reminiscence Centre' in 2002 using the Old Kato House, a registered National Treasure. This has been done in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. It works with older people both in the community and in residential care and involves children. The Reminiscence School takes place once a week for eight weeks. Participants become friends and want to continue after the course has finished, so they become volunteers at the museum for events that introduce children to the exhibits. The museum has also produced reminiscence kits on various themes that are lent out. Demand has resulted in long waiting lists. Unusually, the museum is seeking to validate the effects of its work with people with dementia (including reduced use of medication and improvements in memory) through scientific research.

Many museums and art galleries around the world have become interested in engaging people living with dementia. This interest owes a lot to the Museum of Modern Art in New York and its Meet Me at MoMA initiative. One example of this work in Japan is monthly meetings for people living with dementia at the prestigious **National Museum of Western Art** in Tokyo which is led by Arts Alive described below. (Though it was remarked that the Japanese tendency to eschew seating in galleries doesn't help make them age-friendly).

Since 1999 (the International Year of the Older Person) a major strand of activity for **Art Resources Development Association (ARDA)** founded by Emiko Namikawa and based in Tokyo has been work in care homes. ARDA has organised over 100 workshops since then. This has primarily been visual work, though other art forms are also used. Each project begins with a class for the carers, in which they have an opportunity to experience the role of art, followed by a workshop for older people and time for reflection. Some of this work has been sponsored by Pfizer, including an art lecture series. In order to make the work sustainable,

training is given to care workers, an approach familiar in the UK, as are concerns that care homes have no budgets for this work. The exercises used, such as using 'chair dancing' and residents drawing round their hands and using this to create a life story are identical to approaches taken in the West. It is proving difficult to expand the reach of this work as care homes still tend to see art as ancillary and are reluctant to fund.

**Arts Alive led by Yoko Hayashi**, a visual artist and academic, works across art forms with disadvantaged groups in a participative style which has much in common with work in the UK. (Indeed the work in part stems from an Arts in Health conference in Manchester in 1999). Its Mission Statement is 'Creating Changes in the Reality of Health Care and Social Welfare through the Power of Art.' Collaborations take place with some of Japan's most prestigious art collections, such as the National Museum of Western Art and the Bridgestone Museum of Art. Hayashi's work is often site specific and this has found a new environment in care settings. The first project was in a care home located in a traditional Japanese house, which it was decided to decorate with Shoji paper screens dividing the rooms. These were illustrated with stories told to them by the residents, including about local festivals from their childhoods. Projects emphasise the enjoyment of creating work together. Other projects include a travelling art exhibition that goes around care homes for around six months at a time and the Art Communication Project takes people living with dementia and their carers to galleries and brings art to those who can't leave care homes.

Japan is famous for the excellence of its design and Kobe City has been declared a City of Design in the UNESCO network. It has a focus on disaster recovery. A 90 year old former raw silk testing centre has been transformed into the home of the innovative **Design and Creative Centre Kobe (KIIT+O)** which seeks to use design to solve social issues and has undertaken a number of projects with older people ('Elderly People + Creative'). The first of these was the redesign of a newsletter for a social welfare association into a magazine called *Omusubi*. It is now edited by a team of older people and students, written in a livelier way, as well as being easier to read. The widespread concern over isolated older people has led to a project to change an existing cafe used exclusively by older people into an intergenerational 'Fureai Open Cafe' where children serve (meaning that their mothers come too) and items such as beautifully designed table cloths are rented out to help sustainability. This initiative has spread. Another project has been around 'New Towns' begun forty years ago which are now mainly occupied by older people. New festivals and exhibitions involving children are being used to regenerate towns.

**Yumiko Fujiwara** is an individual artist working in the medium of traditional Japanese painting. She began holding art classes for older people at a day care facility after the doctor who ran it cared for her dying father. A series of



Workshop by Arts Alive. Photo courtesy of Yoko Hayashi



Omusubi – KIIT+O

progressive and themed workshops led to work which the participants could take home. There were also special workshops for family members to understand the processes used and to help use the work to deepen their relationships with their elderly relatives. Fujiwara has reflected deeply on her practice and has distilled this into observations about practice with older people which would be very resonant for artists in this field in the UK. She also redecorated the centre which was located in a traditional building to create a nostalgic and welcoming atmosphere that was also stimulating.



味の世界

アスピコーシ

NIPPON BEER  
ニッポンビール

塩小賣所

のこメソ

アサヒビール  
ミツ矢ソース  
キリンビールの

産婦人科 看護分院

Kitanagoya – Historical Museum exhibition

## Some Observations

Looking at the demographics of Japan is peering into the future of Britain in 30 years time. We have significant cultural and societal differences, for instance in our patterns of migration and our traditional attitudes towards older people. There are deep, as well as subtle, differences between Japan and Britain in our approach to the arts and their role in society. A powerful aesthetic style is visible everywhere in Japan, both in the everyday use of the visually pleasing as well as its in dynamic modernity, exemplified by Manga and youth culture. The division between 'high arts' and community/participative arts and crafts feels more pronounced than in Britain.

Having said that, and despite the considerable barrier of language, much of the work I saw in Japan feels entirely relevant, deeply inspiring and, sometimes, very familiar.

In terms of quality, it is undeniable that Japan is the home to some unrivalled practice in arts and older people. In terms of quantity and scale, though, it has been impossible to make an assessment and no one I spoke to was willing to hazard a guess. There was a concern among some Japanese that they had not been able to assemble enough evidence of the impact of their work, in comparison to the UK. (Much of that evidence, in my view though, is transferable). Artists and researchers rarely seem to collaborate. It did appear to me, though, that arts and older people work in Japan took place in greater isolation than in the UK and that Japanese artists in the field strongly wished to have better networks and a greater sense of a common enterprise.

Finally, as in the UK, Japan has always had its celebrated older artists. One of the works in the newly re-opened Museum in the beautiful town of Obuse is one of Hokusai's last pieces, probably painted aged 90 in 1849. Called 'Dragon of Smoke Ascending over Mount Fuji' some take it to be an allegorical self-portrait of the artist in old age, still aspiring to mastery over his art. The developing field of arts and older people work in Japan holds the promise that creative ageing can be the aspiration of anyone.



Fureai Open Cafe - KIIT+O. Photo © Natsumi Morimoto

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