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Struggle with the “Japanese Healthcare System for Older Adults” A Case of a Vietnamese Professional Care Worker

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Abstract

This article, through critically examining the life story of a Vietnamese refugee currently working in an assisted facility in Japan, excavates multiple and intersectional social labelling mechanisms for migrant growing old in a foreign country, as well as its influence on the individual level. The experience of the informant suggests a dilemma of labelling, between her identity as a member of ethnic minority in Japan, a social position assumed to be helped; and her identity as a health care professional for older adults recognized, a social position depending on the caregiving industry which rely on institutional labelling to obtain proper financial support by the government. Her dilemma indicates two cultural implications underlying the health care system for older adults in Japan, and more generally migrants participating in the system. In addition, she must face her own aging experience shaped by both her occupation and chronological age. On the other hand, she has to distance herself away from other Vietnamese older adults, and broadly other older adults in ethnic minorities to earn her own position of caring them as a healthcare professional.

Keywords: Aging, Healthcare System, Vietnamese Refugees, Intersectionality, Transnational Mobility

I INTRODUCTION

This essay, through an ethnographical description on the life of a Vietnamese refugee, whose name is Ha Thi Thanh Nga (hereinafter called Nga) ⁽¹⁾, examine the multiple and intersectional social labelling mechanisms for migrant growing old in a foreign country. Nga moved to Japan from Vietnam as a refugee and has become to be an older adult. In this sense, she herself is subjected to, and sensitively represents the socially constructed category or identity of “Vietnamese-Japanese” as well as “being aged”.

Nga narrated her own experience facing “aging” as a “refugee” in Japan, together with what she believed to be the ideal caregiving for refugees in Japan. Her experience is insightful to reveal how she implements aging care for Vietnamese older adults while struggling with the labeling of “aged” and “refugee in Japan”. These implications include, first, how older adults were labeled and managed as “aged”. Second, how this management of “aged” intersects with the management of “refugees”, or more broadly “immigrant” in Japan.

While a large scholarly effort has already been made to study how individuals and societies struggle with aging as an inevitable phase of life (Scharlach & Hoshino, 2012), one of the key issues that has not been well addressed is how the category or identity of “being aged” defines the aging process.

Aging is widely believed to be an inevitable experience for all humans, just as death is for all. However, the increase in chronological age does not automatically lead to “aging”. Aging refers

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to a socially constructed process of labeling someone as “aged”. If we are to assume that both “aging” and “aged” are not biological fact, but as a socially constructed process, “being aged” is a category or identity that allows society to manage them as part of its population. Older adults are urged to be “aged” by societies around them and adopt an identity as an “aged” citizen. From the perspective of the individuals, the aging processes entails negotiation processes with societies, which seek to impose the social label of aged on individuals. Individual will either accept or avoid it according to their own life outlook.

Starting by government statistics, according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (2023), the dependency ratio of older adults has reached 48.6, in which older population over 64 was divided by working population between 15 and 64 with quotient result multiplying 100, a parameter showing the proportion of aging population in the total population. It means every two people of the working population has to support the life of one older adult in public finance. The total population of Japan are divided into three categories: working population; underaged population; and older population. From the statistics, it is understandable that the working population are said to support the other two groups. The number of populations that the dependency ratio and the aging ratio refer not only include people with Japanese nationality, but also foreign residents. In other words, the calculation assumed immigrants are both givers and receivers of the caregiving for older adults.

The overall healthcare system for older adults in Japan is also based on this calculation of population. The fundamental goals of the healthcare policies are to boost both the working population and the underaged population, and to lower the merely the number of the older population statistically. Currently, there are three ways to meet the goals: increasing labor population from overseas countries, encouraging reemployment of older adults after retirement and raising mandatory retirement age. The increasing of migrant workers is one of the solutions envisioned to expand the working population, while reemployment of older adults is a measure to lower the nominal number of the older population on pension benefits. Only raising the mandatory retirement age can serve as a means to boost the working population and reduce the number of people in the older population category at the same time. From an administrative perspective, there are reforms in the National Pension System and the healthcare policies for older adults. In addition, the rhetoric of “healthy old people” also helps promoting the raise of mandatory retirement age. However, no matter which policies are introduced, the underlying assumption of “capable” working population supporting “incapable” others remained unchanged.

Without exception applicable to people residing in Japan, Nga’s promotion of ideal caregiving and herself has to confront this imposed assumption. In the following sections, we first summarize Nga’s awareness of issues on caregiving, based on her prize-winning speech addressing the caregiving issue of the older adult who were also first-generation refugee. Moreover, we will present what Nga told in the five interviews and other medias⁽²⁾ about her experiences of aging and her thoughts of ideal caregiving for refugees living in Japan,

In this article, we have no intention to provide policy-oriented discussions concerning how cultural factors and considerations are required to facilitate the overall functioning of the Long-Term Care Insurance System. Policy-oriented discussions have addressed the needs in culturally-sensitive healthcare services by immigrants (Hoshino, 2012). Issues such as linguistic supports and culturally specific considerations, as well as the implementations, including frontline practices and inclusive and barrier-free facilities are the main concerns. However, it is also true that policy-oriented researches have often overlook the fact of the population management with social labels like “aged” and “migrant”, as well as the individual experiences dealing with labelling. The label of “aged” is closely associated with the social implications that those who were labelled are a part of the “incapable” and marginalized population. Corresponding implications can also be perceived

from the label of “migrant”. Nga’s case would suggest that it is vital to take this as a case study reflecting how the individual strive and resist these policies rather than interpreting her life experience in an implicit agreement with these policies that reinforces these two labels.

II THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: NGA’S ADVOCACY SPEECH

Nga won the Refugee Support Prize in the Sixth Speech Contest concerning the Caregiving and Nursing Care of Migrants, with her presentation titled “How the first generation refugees have lived a fruitful ‘*Rogo*’ life”⁽³⁾. While the concept of “older adults” can be defined by chronological age, the word “*rogo*” (老後, lit. life after being aged) has a broader cultural meaning than just life after retirement, involving changes in roles, occupations, and family relationships, such as the end of parenthood.

Nga’s award-winning presentation is indicative of ethnic minorities generally labelled as “foreign residents” in the older adult healthcare policies in the Japanese context. She advocated Vietnamese older adults in Japan should make further use of the Long-Term Care Insurance System in the presentation. She proposed similarly in an Internet radio program in Vietnamese inviting her as guest speaker⁽⁴⁾. We can observe her compromises with the imposed assumption that capable working population supporting incapable others.

Nga arrived in Japan in 1981 as one of the “Indochina Refugees”. After being settled in some interim accommodation centers, as well as the Resettlement Promotion Center which provided language courses, guidance for life in Japan and vocational counseling service, she started her new life in Japan in 1982. Around the new millennium, she started working for the support of the Vietnamese community, including older adults. Since 2013, with the support of the national Long-Term Care Insurance System, she has been working for the caregiving industry. As of 2023, she is 62 years old and has experienced her aging process.

In her prized speech, she, as a first-generation refugee, elaborated on how the first-generation refugees can live fruitful later years of their life. She addressed a specific cultural factor, that is why Vietnamese refugees in Japan do not use the Long-Term Care Insurance System. She claimed that children were the supposed caregivers for their parents among Vietnamese. As a result, cohabitation of older parents and children is also common. Asking someone else to take care of one’s parents is considered defying filial piety of Confucianism. However, when the same cultural practice applies to the refugee community, it is an overburden to the family. In the presentation, she said, “the young generation is also faced with a hard life. Receiving daycare at the daytimes can alleviate that. Besides, some aspects of caregiving for older adults require the professional knowledges and skills”. It is important to note that, rather than directing taking Nga’s words as facts, her words should be understood more as her imposing vision and representation of the Vietnamese community awaiting critical contextualization into her own life experience the same process of growing old and being a caregiver for older adults meanwhile.

Nga mentioned another reason in her speech why Vietnamese refugees do not apply for the Long-Term Care Insurance. Aside from the complicated procedures, they are hesitant to receive formal care because they are grateful to the Japanese government, which has accepted refugees and provided with Public Assistance (seikatsu hogo)⁽⁵⁾ since their arrival in Japan.

Removing their hesitation, Nga persuades the Vietnamese community that “with government subsidies for care, you can improve your health and increase your life expectancy and reduce overall costs”. Nga points out that the Vietnamese older adults will be a burden to their families if their illnesses deteriorate. By delivering this speech in the Contest, in which she spoke the refugees who need caregiving, it is understandable that Nga is more likely to align her speech with the purpose of the system. However, her speech also revealed that, former refugees including Nga are still very sensitive to the labeling and categorization of “Vietnamese refugees”, “foreign

residents in Japan” (*zainichi gaikokujin*), as well as “aged” they might face in the Japanese society. Nga and the Vietnamese community are hesitant and worried about the social category of “aged” and “foreign residents in Japan”. This is because they sense an unconquerable division between those who labels and those who are labeled. Her speech, while seemingly adjusting appealing to the system, reveals some unique cultural considerations that the community is facing.

In the radio program that Nga and the first author talked with each other, Nga frequently used a phrase “*daini no jinsei*” (second life). For Nga and members of the Vietnamese community, with the word of “second life” (and other terms to be introduced in the analysis), her word choice suggests their thoughts of strive their aging processes that are planned by the Japanese society. The next session, by showing how keywords like “second life” and later life intertwined in her retelling of her own story and her thoughts about aging care, reveals her tactics to deal with the institutionalized “aged” and “aging”, as well as her identity issues concerning the label “Vietnamese refugees in Japan”.

III STRUGGLING WITH LABELS: “FOREIGN RESIDENTS” AND “AGED”

In the previous session, as said in the speech delivered by Nga, people who were accepted as refugees in Japanese society including Nga were very sensitive to the labels imposed by the Japanese society, such as “Vietnamese refugees”, “migrants residing in Japan” and “aged”. Regarding their sensitive reaction to “aging”, some terms like later life and “*daini no jinsei*” (second life) that already has some meaning in the Japanese communities, were absorbed by the Vietnamese community in Japan. This section explores how Nga, as well as the Vietnamese refugee community in Japan, created meaning for these vocabularies. The five interviews concerning Nga’s life history revealed the label of incapability, as well as the interpellation of “being compelled to be capable”. In addition, these interviews also indicate how the word “second life” connects with her understanding between caregiving for older adults and the urge of making the people of the “aged” category capable. Finally, how Nga, on the side of caregiving, understands second life.

1. Life History

(1) From Vietnam to Japan: Becoming Someone to be Helped

Nga born in Southwest Vietnam in 1961. Back then, Vietnam had already been divided by two nations. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) was established next year, Nga’s Catholic family, selling bamboo products, struggled to survive. In 1981, Nga’s father thought “there is no longer any hope in this country”. He then ordered his kids to flee Vietnam. Nga is the fifth sister out of her nine siblings. Six of them, including Nga, took 3 boats to escape from the country. Her parents and three siblings are still Vietnam. 3 siblings are in the U.S., and Nga with her two siblings are in Japan.

Nga with her older brother left the country together. After boarding a rescue tanker, she was held in the refugee camp. As Japan decided to take in Nga in a relatively a short time, she decided to settle down in Japan. Nga married in the refugee camp in Nagasaki.

Japanese government opened center for Indochina refugees who decided to live in Japan, called “Resettlement Promotion Center”. These centers offered settlement service packages including orientation activities for about a month, Japanese education for up to 4 months, social life adaptation guidance for a month. After this program, career talk and job negotiations were held by the Center. According to the survey of employment status of refugees in 1983, males were usually assigned to the jobs like mechanics, electronic device assemblers, and melder; while females were to seamstress (Refugee Assistance Headquarters, Foundation for the Welfare and Education of the Asian, 2019, pp. 128-129). In the case of Nga’s family as well as the family of her father-in-law, after they finished the program at the center, they started their life in Kagawa

Prefecture in 1982. Nga gave birth to her first child before she started her life in Japan. Later in her life in Kagawa Prefecture, she was a seamstress.

After that, heard from other Vietnamese refugees, working as a paster in Chemical Shoes Industry in Kobe offered a higher pay. In 1983, she moved to Nagata Ward, Kobe City with her family and her father-in-law's family. She worked for multiple factories there. Until now, many Vietnamese are still working in these factories. They are not paid in time rate but piece rate. According to Multilanguage Center FACIL (2022), these pasters thought the job fit the best into their life, saying "when children were young, being a paster is good. Paying by hour led to a lower total income for us. However, as it is paid in piece rate, during the time children going to the kindergarten, like around 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., a considerable income can be earned". Nga reckoned this in the interview. After coming to Kobe, she gave birth to four more children. The children either went to nursery school or were taken care by their aunt if they were sick. Nga kept on working at the meantime.

Up to this point of Nga's life, it is the process that she started from scratch as a refugee, the weakest position to transform herself into an independent resident. She felt indebted to the Japanese government for assistance. She did not want to receive any assistance all the time and tried to make an effort to start her own life with her own strengths. In other words, it is a recuperative process from an "incapable" refugee to a "self-independent" refugee. Regarding this, it is no doubt that, in her life narrative, the notion of "self-help" reveals her strong intention to shift from weak positions like refugees and migrants to someone who can to a certain extent change his or her circumstances with one's strengths. It may be possible for individuals to reach a relatively desirable situation where he or she can take back their dignified life and identity. However, this process cannot be regarded to be desirable if the change from "incapable" refugees to "capable" refugee is triggered by compulsion.

(2) Turning Point: Earthquake, Volunteering and NPO: Becoming Someone Who Can Help

The volunteering during the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in 1995 marked a crucial shift in Nga's life. The earthquake has done a considerable damage in the area where she lived. Nga was also one of the victims and was evacuated to a junior high school. Takatori Church, where she regularly visited, was burnt. The ruined site was turned into a makeshift headquarters coordinating volunteers all over the world, namely Takatori Relief Base.

The earthquake spotlighted the "incapable" side of the Vietnamese community. Nga found the "incapable" label unbearable and sought to counter the situation by joining the volunteer teams. To show the gratitude of the Vietnamese community to the volunteers for the relief efforts, Nga, together with other Vietnamese women, cooked Vietnamese cuisine every week. The following statement from the interview clearly shows that feeling.

At the time, there were up to 200 volunteers at the Takatori Relief Base, and they needed food. The Vietnamese women decided to help cook for the people who helped them. Every Wednesday, the Vietnamese women gathered and provided meals. (Interview on May 26, 2014)

Two years after the earthquake, two major organizations that supported the Vietnamese earthquake victims, "Rescue Network for Vietnamese Victims" and "Life Recovery Center for foreign residents in Hyogo Prefecture", merged as "Kobe Foreigners Friendship Center" (KFC). As Nga was regarded as the one who had the highest Japanese competency, she was then employed as a staff member in the KFC. To a certain extent, it can be said that Nga paved her way forward with her strengths. She changed her career and her life, that she could become a capable person

desirable by the Japanese society. Nga started to use the word second life referring this change, as spoken in the 10th Anniversary Publication of NGO Vietnam in Kobe.

With the establishment of “Kobe Foreigners Friendship Center” in February, 1997, I entered the NGO industry and became a staff member. By then, I had started my second life. Entering a world unknown to me, I was fascinated and absorbed to my new and interesting experience. (Ha, 2011, p. 3)

Since 1997, Nga has been involved in community work for the Vietnamese refugees. Her community work can be separated into three period. The first is the above-mentioned period that she worked for KFC between 1997 and 2001. The target of KFC is not only Vietnamese, but also other foreign residents such as Koreans. Later between 2001 and 2012, Nga was a representative of a self-help group named “NGO Vietnam in Kobe”, which was spun off from the KFC. After that, she returned to KFC.

In 1998, when Nga first worked at KFC, she joined a study tour to the United States and Canada. She visited self-help organizations, support groups for older adults and youth support groups of Vietnamese Americans. She was surprised by the energy of the local community. In the report published in 1999, Nga mentioned her feeling towards the Vietnamese older adults met at Vietnamese Voluntary Foundation (VIVO).

The older adults I met at VIVO fight for their citizenship and nationalities, so they bite the bullet to learn English. For this goal, they also negotiate with the related the local government departments. Why do they pay so much effort? For a person like me staying in Japan for 17 years, I have never thought of permanent residence and naturalization. In the United States, no matter how old they are, they have a good command of English. Maybe it is what they see as American Dream, so they are forward-looking. (Ha, 1999, p. 40)

She started modifying her way to provide support in Japan, based on what she learnt from the United States. In her first term of four-year service in KFC, she tackled problems including unpaid salaries, employment discrimination, as well as housing discrimination on the basis of ethnic backgrounds. She said “I was thinking that I could not do anything. However, I started changing my mind, and maybe I can do something”. Her experience in America became her momentum during the period.

As she recalled her experience in the 10th Year Anniversary Publications published in 2007, Nga was assigned projects including: the support of daily maintenance of disaster relief shelters, information dissemination and language support, administrative negotiation, rotation of legal consultation meetings, life consultation, and employment support.

Nga has made “becoming capable” her main goal, not only her career development in her own activities, but also providing assistance to Vietnamese refugees in Japan. Nga became a representative of the Vietnamese self-help organization called NGO Vietnam in Kobe. The missions of NGO Vietnam in Kobe include some lines like “to the problems and difficulties Vietnamese refugees in Japan, we support to the point that they can solve on their own”, “Vietnamese refugees in Japan working hand in hand with the local community to participate in the society”, as well as “supporting Vietnamese youths in Japan to group with pride”. The organization was run by Vietnamese and Japanese staff. Apart from life consultation, language course in Japanese and Vietnamese, as well as festive gatherings on Lunar New Year and Mid-Autumn festivals were organized. She also collaborates with Silver College in Kobe City, the place where senior Japanese can learn something. Besides, she also started visiting the home of Vietnamese older adults with

nurses to provide health consultation. Activities like senior-oriented hiking and social learning, Vietnamese drug prohibition campaigns and cultural seminar are also part of the routines.

During the time she was away from KFC, KFC became a Special Non-Profit Corporation in 2004, and provided care services for older adults under the Long-Term Care Insurance System. “Hana no Kai”, originally started as a cooking club for older Korean women, can be further institutionalized into day care service. After the development, it continues to provide care services for Korean migrants and immigrants in Japan, such as employing staff members that can speak Korean and serving Korean food for lunch. Nga was then invited back to KFC the next year after she left NGO Vietnam in Kobe in 2012. She was also asked to take a professional license of Care Worker to facilitate KFC’s transition. After she obtained the license, she became the leader of Visiting Care Team, tailored to the needs of Vietnamese older adults.

With the career change, her criteria of judging “capable” and “incapable” shifted from the label of Vietnamese refugees in Japan, to the label of “aged” that she was experiencing. To struggle with the label of “Vietnamese refugees in Japan”, Nga worked together with the Vietnamese community to overcome the stigma. However, concerning the label of “aged”, her ways to overcome the “label” diverged from how she helped older adults in the community.

After her contract terminated at the age of 60 as a mandatory retirement, Nga wished to continue working, be reemployed by KFC as a leader of the caregiving to Vietnamese older adults. In Japan, people usually “retire” from regular employment at age 60 but are immediately rehired until age 65. It is likely that Nga is taking the same step as many Japanese. On the other hand, from the perspective of social labeling, there is another possible interpretation: she chose to continue working in order to avoid being labeled as aged. However, that also means the possibility of labelling someone as aged. The following is going to show how Nga understood the two divergent meaning of second life, that is indicative to her understanding of labelling.

2. “Second Life” and her Thoughts on Caregiving

In the previous section, from Nga’s life history, the labelling of “Vietnamese refugee” evoked in her anxiety of “incapable” and “compelled to be capable”. The feeling triggered her decision to help other people. This section will focus on the “*Daini no Jinsei* (second life)” as a keyword, which is closely linked to “enabling” those labeled as “aged” on the one hand, implies later life after the retirement. Following the identification of the discrepancy, we will examine how Nga attempts to resolve the discrepancy, referring to her narratives on aging and caregiving for older adults.

(1) Second Life

In her retrospection, Nga stated that her “second life” began when she moved from an employee at the Chemical Shoe Industry working on machinery, to an administrative and professional staff at a Non-Profit Corporation on the Japanese social welfare system. However, the “second life” Nga envisions in the NPO is somewhat different from the “second life” that she beliefs of being acquired by older adults.

In a recent interview, Nga mentioned that she acquired knowledge about “second life” when she gave a lecture at Silver College in Kobe City in 2001⁽⁶⁾. Seeing Japanese older adults countered the mindset of “growing old is to be waiting for death” with their energetic life in Silver College, Nga felt that it was the necessity for her to promote “second life” for Vietnamese older adults.

From Nga’s point of view, older adults in Japan develop their second lives, but Vietnamese people do not develop. They think they became useless if they cannot work. They think there are no other options but waiting to death when they grow old.

Every year on the open day of Silver College, she organizes an outing to visit the College with

Vietnamese older adults. Nga said to Vietnamese older adults that waiting for death was wasteful. She also told these Vietnamese older adults that your life experience is precious. She want them to share more with the following generations and they should make good use of their experience. Individual consultations concerning older adults' aspirations are also organized. In other words, "second life" that the older adults should have is related to the period that in Japan generally regarded as "*rogo*".

Regarding the Vietnamese older adults, in Nga's understanding, their "second life" starts when they can no longer work. However, Nga earned her "second life" by shifting her career from shoe workshop to NPO. She thinks that her second life does not rely on the ability to work, and that it depends on her belief of whether she feels capable. Her own view of "second life" showed a contrastive view against her presentation mentioned.

To reevaluate these different understanding of second life, in terms of the "capable", "incapable" and "forced to be capable" mentioned at the earlier parts of the article, second life that Vietnamese older adults are encouraged to obtain can be regarded as the transition from socially constituted "incapable aged being" to "being compelled to be capable". However, "second life" obtained by Nga lead to live as a "capable person" and captured a turning point from older adults who are "not capable" to a "capable person". In other words, Nga's mindset of care for the Vietnamese elders is deeply rooted in the labeling of "being aged" already implied by the national healthcare system for older adults in the Japanese society. The labeling of "aged" as a precondition for the long-term care system has led her to hold the view: Vietnamese older adults simply wait for death.

(2) Thoughts on Caregiving

To work under a national healthcare system, Nga's role consists of assessing, if not consciously categorizing or labelling, the situation or the neediness of older adults in the nursing home. Nga's role in NGO is to access, if not categorize or label, the situation of older adults in the nursing house.

In the process of the assessment, what she did is to link the notion of filial piety with formal caregiving. There is a persistent belief in the Vietnamese community that it is against the norm for children to place older adults in nursing homes. Nga argues that in modern societies, where family can no longer support older adults on its own, cooperation with the community and the care team are necessary to overcome the notion that children should take care of their parents, if the system is effectively employed, older adults can comfortably stay at home for a long time.

Since my first visit to Vietnam until the recent pandemic travel restrictions, I went back to Vietnam once a year with the siblings living in the United States and Japan. Before the decease of her parents, I did not only visit my hometown in Southwest Vietnam, but also visit the Northern Vietnam, where my mother's hometown is located. By creating these opportunities of reunion between my mother and her sister, I thought that it was my way of filial piety. (Interview on 19 February 2023)

Nga's narrative suggests that the use of formal caregiving assistance, which is often regarded as inconsistent with conventional filial piety, can be interpreted as a substitution of filial piety. As mentioned previously, the cultural judgment that older parents are supposed to be cared for by their children is deep-rooted in the Vietnamese community. In this sense, the promotion for further use of public caregiving assistance came to a halt. However, for Nga, filial piety is subjected to a more radical reinterpretation that, as long as children are aware of the duties, the fact who actually carried out the caregiving is no longer crucial. As a result, receiving formal caregiving

assistance can also be regarded as a form of filial piety, as well as not using formal caregiving assistance. The idea of the day service fits very well with Nga's vision.

Besides revising the traditional idea of filial piety, she also attempted to remake the system to better suit the communal need, with introducing a variety of unique methods and innovations into caregiving for older adults. For Nga, caring for Vietnamese older adults is not only a means to provide them with various services prepared by the Japanese Long-Term Care Insurance System, but also an opportunity to realize her own career through the management. For this reason, Nga has not merely followed the protocol of the scheme but also customized her ways of caregiving to meet the needs of individuals. The root of this idea can be readily found in Nga's practices in the NGO Vietnam in KOBE.

Apart from the routine activities, I have always tried to help older adults along with their personal wishes and needs. For a lonely old man, I would talk to him. For an old man who wants to see cherry blossoms, I would go with him, even if it is just one person. For an old lady who wants to grow vegetables, we would rent a plot of land and have her grow vegetables. For a person who is interested in the Japanese society, I accompany him or her to the place where he or she likes to visit. (Ha, 2005, p. 108)

In the five years, her activities organized to fit the needs of Vietnamese refugees in Japan as much as possible. I came up these activities naturally and tried to make them regularly if necessary. For hasty Vietnamese, the Long-Term Care Insurance System does not fit well. (Ha, 2006, p. 35)

In 2013, after Nga obtained the professional license of care worker, she became conscious of caregiving management role (the "capable" side). Despite the care built on the basis of the Japanese caregiving system, she developed her unique ways of caregiving as a professional. In the interview in 2023, she emphasized,

It is difficult for her to promote the Long-Term Care Insurance System without trust. I started by organizing the field trip similar to what I did at NGO Vietnam in Kobe. For older adults who joined the field trip, I held an exchange meeting between Vietnamese fellows, that is the same with the day service supported by the Long-Term Care Insurance System. If they are interested, they can receive the assessment on their level of required care, that allows them to receive the day service supported by the Insurance System. Vietnamese older adults have language problems when creating the care plan with the assessment concerning the care level. By utilizing Kobe City's Communication Supporter System, KFC can explain the Long-Term Care Insurance System through a Vietnamese interpreter without the Vietnamese older adults having to pay for the service. Following these procedures, Vietnamese older adults can enjoy the support from the Insurance System. (Interview on 19 February 2023)

These forms of caregiving, as we can see, are not carried out in a uniform manner. She made much effort to make it personalized.

Upon my second employment with KFC, I provided caregiving that tailored to individual needs. For example, older adults who liked staying somewhere other than their own homes can enjoy the day service; those who would like to stay at home can enjoy home-visiting care. There are also people that only make use of hospital assistance, and people who only registered but did not make use of any services. It is not necessary to compel people to make use of all the services but

choose those that may suit their varying needs. For example, for people who choose to pass away at home but not in hospitals, she we will take corresponding support to help them. (Internet radio program on 1 December 2018)

Thus, Nga, who initially followed only the protocol of caring for older Vietnamese within the Japanese Long-Term Care Insurance System, became a professional caregiver to introduce a variety of services that were available under the system on her own ingenuity. By having a license of a professional care worker, she has stood in the positions of caregiving, interpretation, and caregiving management. Her process was a way, in which older Vietnamese could take their “aging” back into their own hands, as well as a way of her achievement of being “capable”.

3. Nga's Vision for the Future

Shortly after Nga became a KFC staff member for the second time in 2013, she visited a nursing home in Australia on a KFC project⁽⁷⁾. She was surprised that Vietnamese people work not only as interpreters, but also managers. When she was beginning her work as a professional caregiver, she was attracted to the position of a professional manager, not only as an advancement in career but also as a way of being more “capable”, rather than simply providing interpretation and mediating help between Japanese and Vietnamese. However, structurally for being more “capable”, she will be standing on the side of labelling other Vietnamese older adults.

In Nga's case, she was supporting the Vietnamese older adults by providing personalized care for them so that they would not only comply with the Japanese system, but also live their own unique later life. However, the personalized care for older adults does not necessarily mean that older adults can step out of the category of “aged”. If Nga is serving as a caregiver, the dilemma of “capable caregivers” and “incapable aged people” has not been properly resolved yet.

Her desire to expand the scope of her activities from caregiving for older adults to other fields can be interpreted as a manifestation of her intention to distance herself from such inescapable paradoxes.

In an interview in 2023, she expressed her future vision to develop a care business for older adults so that older adults in Vietnam can also enjoy the services of “Japanese style caregiving for older adults”⁽⁸⁾. In the Internet radio program, she shared her vision to expand the service area from Kobe City only to other places where many Vietnamese live, if they have needs for tailored care (Radio Program on “Vietnamese older adults living in Japan”).

She also hoped to extend the scope of her support in various fields beyond caregiving for older adults. Nga usually go to a Catholic church in Kobe, where she encounter with young Vietnamese who come to Japan as technical intern trainees⁽⁹⁾ face various difficulties. She would like to support them.

Nga's outreaching vision reflects her wish to “keep working” without being subsumed into the socially constituted category of “aged”. Meanwhile, it also appears to be a hope, however faintly, to nullify the fundamental opposition between “capable” and “incapable”. By expanding her scope in terms of the geographical coverage and age groups, she attempted to pluralize the criteria for labeling in a different direction, which appears to be challenging the uniformity of labeling in the Japanese society. Insofar as labeling is essential to the management of a society's population, of course, her attempt cannot be complete.

Nga has been keenly aware of the powerful stigmatization from the Japanese society. In concluding this section, we would like to quote a straightforward passage from “KFC 25th Anniversary Magazine”, in which Nga described the pressure she has felt.

When I started working at KFC in 1997, I picked up Japanese in my daily life. I did not reach the

proficiency level as an interpreter. Between 1997 and 2001, with my broken Japanese, without any prerequisite knowledge, I became a ‘1/3 ninmae’ in translation, interpretation and life consultation. Reentering KFC and participating in nursing care, I didn’t achieve that with a strong will, but taking advantage of the situation in front of me for 25 years. These two occurrences significantly changed my life. KFC has made me a 2/3-ninmae person. I want to work as long as I can. (Ha, 2022, p. 28)

“Ichi nin mae”, in Japanese, originally means to be a proper adult that can stand up against any difficulties. Her choice of the word “1/3 nin mae” is worth mentioning. She mentioned it again after rejoining KFC. She said, “I did not intentionally achieve all tasks, but simply by free riding the situations and happenings on me in these 25 years. All these things happened on me changed my life”. She grew significantly and became “2/3 nin mae”. She restrained using the word “Ichi nin mae” and has tried to avoid the image of a full-fledged professional. With this sense of inferiority, she aspires to work until she can no longer do so.

The support to refugees, migrants, and older adults, although it helps much these people financially, a compulsion of being capable still exert influence as a result.

IV DISCUSSION

In Asylums (1961), Goffman proposed the concept of “total institutions” for places where all aspects of life are subject to all-encompassing authority that allows no private backstages. What the authors have attempted to argue in this article is that in such “total institutions”, the aging process appears as an identity crisis.

Older adults are in grave jeopardy of being deprived of their previous identities when they are labeled as “aged” in the Japanese healthcare policies. Against this difficulty, Nga attempts to invent an alternative identity for older adults by introducing the term “second life”. However, while Nga herself has successfully avoided being labeled as an “aged”, Vietnamese older adults are unavoidably living in the collective identity, to which the label “aged” refers, even though Nga is aware that the uniqueness of every individual older adult is a key weapon in the struggle against social labeling. It could even be said that Nga’s alternative identity as a “caregiver” was only enabled by labeling collectively other old adults as “aged”. Obviously, the labeling issue is a matter of Japanese social system and the people who sustain it, not of Nga personally.

How can older adults sidestep this deprivation of their identity and lives? The key to solve this question is whether we can get an alternative perspective on identity. Unlike what is commonly believed, identity does not arise primordially from personal experience, but from a sense of being ever incomplete and therefore requiring constant supplementation. The successful development of this sense into communal ties with others is nationalism. The people envisaged by the modern nation-state are the young, productive working population necessary to sustain the nation. The nation-state has never anticipated such a population growing old. The reason why the world today is seriously concerned about the aging of its population that nation-states are inevitably committed to handling the aging of their citizens, who “was not supposed to be aging”. It is supposedly rooted in this configuration of the nation-state that the old adults are labeled as “aged” and segregated from the “abled” or “forced to be abled” population.

Here we can find that the “time” envisioned by the modern nation-state is split into the minimal time demanded by productive efficiency and the time, in which a human life progress⁽¹⁰⁾. The modern nation-state can be described as a project to establish the boundaries of populations that share phonetic languages, as well as demands of productivity since the early capitalist phase. Improving productivity means producing goods and services in a very limited time frame, and the ultimate goal is to reduce the time required for production to zero time lapse.

The discrepancy between these two types of time is the very essence of the issue on aging. The time of production, which is experienced as the accumulation of zero time lapse, and the time of life, which proceeds in real time over a human lifetime, is not mutually acceptable to others. Those who refuse to accept their own aging are in denial about life course and are obstinately committed to productivity.

As a means to resolve this paradox, it is inevitable that the modern nation-state has to shift the emphasis of its rationale for its existence from increasing productivity to increasing consumption. This is because the time spent on consumption is corresponding to life course. The vibrant consumption of the retired generation suggests that they are regaining a real-time life progression. However, if the time spent consuming is merely an increase in consumers' productivity or an increase in production due to stimulated consumption, it does not mean that the modern nation-state has attained "real time" in the true sense of the word. What is in question here is whether the consumption of healthcare for older adults is consumption by themselves or by labor population who has older relatives. Nga's commitment to caregiving makes sense as consumption by herself to correspond to later life, it is necessary to modify the nature of the modern nation-state, including the time-management, rather than her efforts.

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NOTE

- (1) This article decided to uncover the full name of the informant because of the high accessibility of her other interview reports, as well as her unique positionality as both a refugee and a caregiver for refugees. It leads to easy identification and yielding anonymization untenable. We have obtained her agreement and consent for publication with her full name.
- (2) The first author conducted five interview surveys on May 26, 2014, August 19, 2014, October 20, 2018, November 14, 2021, and February 19, 2023. Ns. Nga has also appeared on an Internet radio program, in which the first author is one of the personalities. Nga not only speaks in interviews, but also writes reports and articles in Japanese. In this article, in addition to the first author's interview data, we also analyzed her narratives and her writings in other media.
- (3) The contest, in which Nga was granted the Refugee Support Prize is organized by The Association for Overseas Technical Cooperation and Sustainable Partnerships (AOTS). Most contestants are young people who recently arrived in Japan and take up roles of their caregiving for children and older adults. Contestants like Nga, who have been in Japan for decades, rarely joined the contest.
- (4) You can access the radio program from the web site of FMY (https://tcc117.jp/fmy/thang-12-nguoi-cau-viet-nam-tai-nhat-12%E6%9C%88%E3%80%8C%E6%97%A5%E6%9C%A%E3%81%AB%E6%9A%AE%E3%82%89%E3%81%99%E3%83%99%E3%83%88%E3%83%8A%E3%83%A0%E4%BA%BA%E3%81%AE%E9%AB%98/).
- (5) A survey has been conducted targeting Vietnamese older adults living in Kobe City, but most of the subjects are receiving Public Assistance (Yoshimoto, 2014; Takijiri and Uemoto, 2015). Kawakami (2001) states, "as of February 1990, out of 244 Vietnamese nationals living in Nagata Ward, 118 were receiving Public Assistance, or 48.4%, which is extremely high compared to other cities" (p. 130). The purpose of Public Assistance is to guarantee the minimum standard

of living by providing assistances for those who have trouble making a living despite utilizing all their assets and ability, depending on the level of necessity, and promote self-reliance (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2023). Recipients of Public Assistance are required to make use of their assets, abilities, and whatever else is available for them. You can receive it only if your household's income and assets do not meet the standards (minimum cost of living) set by the Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare. If they own land, houses, cars, etc., they must sell them to cover their living expenses. According to Nga (2005), many of the Vietnamese refugees have insecure jobs and low incomes, so they struggle to make ends meet. Because they do not have the resources to care for their parents, their parents often receive Public Assistance and live in rented homes near their children's homes.

- (6) Silver College provides study opportunities for people over 57 years old, including courses concerning health, life, international communication and collaboration, life environment and composite arts. By taking courses two days weekly, the participants are expected to "contribute to and participate in society; as well as the skills that can boost the Quality of Life" (Kobe Silver College, n.d.). Nga is a regular guest lecturer on the course, offering a talk once a year.
- (7) In the KFC report concerning the elder care in 2014, Nga wrote her part of visiting the nursing care facilities of Chinese and Vietnamese in Australia (Ha, 2014b).
- (8) It contrasts with her interviews between 2014 and 2022 that Nga had no plan to live in Vietnam in the future.
- (9) Technical Intern Training (*Gino jissu*) is a status of residence of Japan established in 1993. The Japanese Government refers to the workers as 'trainees' as the aim is to make an international contribution by transferring technology from Japan, but in Vietnam this system is referred to as 'labour export (*xuat khau lao dong*)'. Kawakami (2008) also mentions newcomer Vietnamese workers are in harsh working conditions. In the 2010s, the number of young Vietnamese coming to Japan as technical intern trainees has increased rapidly.
- (10) These two kinds of time can be thought of as the opposition of documentary time and spoken language time, in which we are currently preparing for a separate article.

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