



OIDEYASU!

AT ERUFA, LIFE BEGINS AT 70!

A Second Home for Kyōto's Korean Elderly

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Every Wednesday morning I walk past the temples of Daitokuji — the center of Zen meditation with its lush bamboo forest and Japanese stone gardens — in the direction of Kinkakuji, or the Golden Pavilion, one of Japan's most famous World Heritage Sites. I pass a couple of smaller temples along the way before arriving at my destination, a beige-colored building tucked away in a residential area.

The place, called Erufa, which means something like "the moment for now is good," is a daycare center for elderly Korean residents in the northern region of Kyōto. Most of the seniors who come to this facility are first-generation Korean women who came to Japan as young girls prior to World War II and spent most of their lives in Kyōto. Now in their late 70s, 80s and even 90s, many of the women's hands are swollen and curved from years of working as sewers and weavers of kimono textile fabric and *obi* sashes.

The seniors who come to the daycare center are part of a far-reaching long-term care insurance system called *Kaigo Hoken Seido*, which was introduced by the Japanese government in April 2000, to meet the needs of Japan's fast-growing elderly population. The system is extensive and complicated, with services ranging from long-term nursing care to home visits by trained caregivers and specialists, to senior daycare centers run by government-reviewed and -approved nonprofit organizations. Most of the daycare centers provide bathing services, lunch, a mid-afternoon snack and activities for the elders, many of whom live alone. An overall health evaluation determines how much care and what level of care the elder will need. They can then choose to either attend the daycare center or have caregivers visit their home and assist with cooking, cleaning, shopping and other household chores.

In 1999, Korean residents in Japan petitioned the Japanese government, asking it to recognize that the needs of the Korean elderly are best served by people who not only understand their culture and customs, but the obstacles they face as foreigners with no right to social pensions — obstacles such as language barriers and social and economic challenges. In response, the government allowed Resident-Korean nonprofit organizations like Erufa to develop daycare centers modeled after Japanese facilities for Korean seniors who desired such an option.

There are currently four branches of Erufa Korean Senior Daycare operating in Kyōto. They provide services to about 150 people. The majority of the daycare attendees are women; only 15 are men. There are 90 employees working in the various sectors as caregivers, nurses, cooks, drivers and administrators. The average monthly cost per person is approximately \$45, plus \$5 for lunch. The fee is paid by those who have the means to pay and waived for those unable to pay.

Every morning, vans with two care workers go door-to-door, picking up the elderly and bringing them to the center. With their arrival, the daily routine begins: first, *ofuro*, a bath, for those

who feel it is safer to bathe at the center with the help of trained workers than alone at home. The seniors then sit in rows and sing songs, including the facility's anthem, written by Erufa's founder, which says that life begins at age 70. They also sing an old children's song from their homeland and the all-time Korean classic, "Ari-rang."

Next on the schedule is modest stretching and

we have curry and rice, other days grilled fish and vegetables, and, occasionally, Korean-style mixed rice, or *bi-bin-bap*. There is always a big dish of kimchee in the middle of the table for all to add to their plates.

After the lunch dishes have been washed and put away, some women help with cleaning the trays while others hang the wet laundry from the day's bathing. We listen to old Korean ballads or sometimes Japanese *enka* (traditional Japanese music) or Mozart's piano classics as we play a game of Othello, fill in coloring books, or sometimes work on handicrafts like origami or papier-mâché.

During the activities, the women talk amongst themselves, recalling hard times from their past. I listen and often wonder what their secret is to have lived such a long life. But as I look around and into their faces, I realize that maybe it's not a secret after all. My distraction has caused me to lose another game of Othello to the second-oldest grandmother, a 94-year-old whose nickname is "Kōcho-sensei" (principal) — a name she earned because of her in-depth, up-to-date knowledge of Japanese and international politics and current events. I snap my finger to show her my disappointment at having lost . . . again. "Kōcho-sensei" bursts into a hearty laugh — an

expression that is engrained in her face. **HH**

Jackie J. Kim lives in Kyōto with her husband. Kim is the author of "Hidden Treasures: Lives of First-Generation Korean Women in Japan." While living in Japan as a JET teacher and later as a graduate student, she interviewed elderly Korean women who had immigrated to Japan. Those interviews led to the publication of "Hidden Treasures." If you're wondering about the title of Kim's column, she says "Oideyasu!" means "Welcome!" in Kyōto ben, or dialect.



Lunchtime at Erufa Korean Senior Daycare. (Photo by Jackie Kim)

an exercise program led by a worker. On some days, the participants are encouraged to recite by memory the contents in the "memory bag." On other days they play volleyball with lightweight cushion balls.

On Wednesdays, I lead an English class, teaching the elders to count from one to 10. I also teach them the alphabets, phonics and greetings. On the first day of our lesson, there were those who said, "What's the use of learning English at our age? Our brains are like rocks now; nothing goes through it anymore." And another who said, "We can't even speak, read or write properly in our mother-tongue of Korean, or in Japanese. We never went to school. How can we learn another language?"

"You are smart," I countered. "You are bilingual. How many people can say that they are able to speak and understand two languages?" A few of the women twisted their lips in doubt. But slowly we began.

"How does a dog bark in Japanese?" I asked. After a few seconds of silence, some responded spontaneously, "Wan!" "Exactly!" I said, holding up my pointer finger. "How does a dog say 'ichi' in English?" "Wan?!" the women uttered reluctantly. "Exactly! Very good!" I continued.

"What noise do a boy and girl make when they kiss in Japanese?" I held up two dolls and made them kiss as I puckered up. Some of the women giggled. "Chuuuu!" yelled out my most energetic 92-year-old student. Roars of laughter filled the room. "Right! 'Ni' in Japanese is 'two' in English."

I continued. "What do we decorate for Christmas?" Two women who have great-grandchildren living in Los Angeles yelled out "Tsurii." "Great! Three. See how easy that was!" Some nodded, smiling. A couple rolled their eyes, pretending to be unimpressed. "Learning, at this age?!"

But all were having fun — including me.

Promptly at 12, lunch is served. On some days

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