

Senior citizens go mad, rampage through Japan

By MICHAEL HOFFMAN

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A man in his 70s, tall and white-haired, takes a *mikan* (Japanese tangerine) from the supermarket shelf. He peels it and starts eating. "What do you think you're doing?" remonstrates a store clerk.

"But if I don't taste it," retorts the man, "how will I know if it's good?"



A woman of about 80, very nicely made up, enters a convenience store. She fills her basket with snacks and walks out again. A clerk chases after her: "You have to pay for those, ma'am."

"My mind wanders. There's nothing I can do about it," says the woman.

With Japan aging at a pace unprecedented in all world history, to grasp the national psychology we must grasp the psychology of the old. Shukan Bunshun takes a stab at it, querying 1,000 people at random on experiences they have had, or scenes they have witnessed, involving the elderly.

The evidence is purely anecdotal, but its drift, for what it's worth, is clear. The elderly are more demanding, more capricious and at times — the word is unavoidable — more obnoxious than ever before.

A man of about 70 takes the rind of a consumed watermelon back to the store. "It wasn't good," he says. "I want my money back."

Once a week or so a woman in her 80s walks from her home to a nearby department store — but once inside, she suddenly

finds herself in need of one of the store's wheelchairs. "Push me, won't you?" she entreats a saleslady. She always finds someone who feels uncomfortable about refusing, though she never buys anything.

Once she went too far. "Would you mind," she asked, "taking me to the department store on the other side of the station?" Even with the very old in a still somewhat Confucian society, there are limits.

An ambulance driver vents his frustration over the numerous senior citizens who call for an ambulance without really needing one. "The most surprising incident of that kind," he tells Shukan Bunshun, "was when a man asked me if I could please stop somewhere, he had to use the toilet."

A certain senior citizens' club provides health checks and medical advice. One club member is a man in his 80s. "When I try to take his blood pressure," says a 56-year-old female staffer, "he takes hold of my hand. He puts his arm around my waist. He touches my breasts. The younger women won't go near him, so I have him all to myself . . ."

"My 88-year-old mother lives alone," relates a woman of 60. "She's being stalked by a man of the same age. He phones her several times a day. If she turns her phone off he rides his wheelchair to her house and makes threatening remarks. So she leaves the phone on. She feels it's easier to put up with his phone calls."

It's never easy being old, and it's doubly difficult, Shukan Bunshun points out, in times like our own, when rapid change can leave the elderly very far behind.

"I once saved an old woman from being run over by a truck," says a 39-year-old man. "'You could've been killed!' I burst out. 'That,' she snapped, 'would have been just fine!' "

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