

The mystery of Japan's missing centenarians



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Is there a granny in your bottom drawer? 1,000 centenarians officially registered as alive have not been seen for years

The plan was simple: knock on Sogen Kato's front door, congratulate him on his longevity, offer a cash reward and inquire whether Tokyo's oldest resident would, at the age of 111, mind taking part in Japan's "Respect the Elderly" festivities on September 20.

After a bit of doorstep argy-bargy with his 81-year old daughter, the authorities were led upstairs to Kato's bedroom. He was there all right. Or, at least, his bones were: swaddled in bandages and surrounded by newspapers from October 1978, the last time he had drawn breath or followed world affairs.

At first, the reaction of officials was bafflement. The records showed Kato as a punctilious form-filler, a clockwork casher of his monthly pension cheques and, critically, alive.

Soon a ghastly truth dawned: first on Adachi ward in which he lived, then on Tokyo, then on Japan as a whole. It was not just that Kato had been a mummified skeleton for 32 years, or that he had, apparently, starved himself to death as a “living Buddha”, or that his surviving family (later arrested) had illegally pocketed £70,000 of pension payments. It was that official records — and the Japanese — were not to be trusted. Few blows to national psyche could be as violent. The discovery of Kato has plunged Japan into perhaps its greatest crisis of confidence for decades: a nation that prides itself on precision, honesty and orderliness has found itself in a tangle of slapdash, dysfunction and fraud.

The Adachi ward officials set about assuring themselves this was a one-off incident and went to check on 113-year-old Fusa Furuya, Tokyo’s oldest woman. A doorstep discussion with an ageing daughter revealed that, despite what the records showed, Fusa Furuya had not been seen at the house for 50 years. An alternative address given to police turned out to be a car park.

Japan started to wonder about its 41,000 centenarians. Anomalies began appearing everywhere: Aichi prefecture found it had a woman on its books who was officially alive at the age of 142. In Osaka, more than 5,100 people aged over 120 are “missing” — officially alive, but almost certainly dead.

As the formal search began, the findings made it worse. There was the discovery that Kikue Mitsuishi, registered as 104 and another pension claimer, had resided (cleaned and crushed) in her son’s rucksack for more than a decade. He had, of course spent the £1,000 annual cash gifts paid to the super-old.

The records showed that a man in Kobe was in rude health (no hospital visits since 1970), enjoying retirement (his pension payments were being used) and about to become the oldest man on the planet: 127. A visit to his home revealed he died while the Vietnam War was still raging. Recently the daughter of Asakichi Miyata was forced to show authorities the wardrobe drawer in which she had stored her father’s cadaver since he died in 2004.

In many cases children in their fifties and sixties have returned home, found their parents dead and decided to keep receiving their pensions rather than registering the deaths or paying for a funeral. And in Japan, people have now realised, you can get away with that.

But the missing centenarians have also hinted at the hardship in Japan: it is a wealthy nation on paper, but one in which one person in six lives below the poverty line. The false pension claims, analysts say, are the pathology of a society where millions are struggling.

As Japan’s 47 prefectural governments scramble to establish who is alive, it is starting to appear that the great age of many Japanese is a construct of bureaucratic incompetence, fraud and a welfare system corrupted beyond fixing. “It is not the centenarians that are lost, but Japan itself,” says Mariko Bando, the principal of Showa Women’s University and a leading sociologist. “The true problem, what is so terribly difficult for Japan to accept, is that we are living an illusion. The missing old

people are a symptom of a misplaced belief in the goodness of people and the competence of the state. We must start seizing reality.”

But, says one Tokyo official, the centenarians are probably the tip of the iceberg. “Japan may be just one incident from realising that most of its systems are not fit for purpose. With the centenarians, it’s nasty but harmless. With a big earthquake in Tokyo, these systemic failures could be terribly costly.”

The latest tally of regional investigations suggests that more than 1,000 centenarians officially registered as alive have not been seen by family or officialdom for years. Attempts to dismiss the phenomenon as an example of whacky Japan have ended abruptly. Its perception of nationhood is accumulated from local residential records — files whose accuracy depends on basic honesty.

Huge legal weight is accorded to the “inkan” name stamp that Japanese use to sign documents, but which anyone can wield. Only one half of a Japanese couple is required to be present at a registry office wedding, if they’ve brought their partner’s name stamp. Japan’s elderly are called upon to confirm their existence by stamping and returning a postcard. Such social workers as exist in Japan are prevented from entering homes by privacy laws. The scope for faking the generously pensioned old age of a parent, say officials, is huge.

“The administration of Japan functions on the assumption that there are no bad people,” says Manabu Hajikano, an official in the residential registry section of the Adachi ward. “We trust people to provide us with honest information and the whole system is planned on that basis. To switch to an administrative system that assumed people had criminal tendencies would be so different that I think it would be impossible.”

Other officials shared a similar view: that pension fraud — and possibly darker scams — is the price Japan pays for postponing the bureaucratic upheaval the 21st-century demands. “Japan lives this dream that people are good and makes it too easy for people to tell lies. As the economy and unemployment levels worsen, the temptation to commit fraud will rise,” Bando says.

The centenarian debacle, says the social commentator Soichiro Tahara, finds the fundamentals of Japanese society on the brink of collapse. And Masanobu Masuda, a former cabinet adviser on Japan’s demographic crisis, outlines his three worst horrors. The first is the uncomfortable sense that Japanese society bears only passing resemblance to the one its civil service is set up to manage. Everything in Japanese officialdom, Masuda says, is based around the notion that there would be a young generation living with its parents and ready to handle their affairs honestly.

Another potential shock is that the centenarians represent darker deeds. If official checks were extended to the larger population of 70 to 90-year-olds, Japan could be confronted with the frightening inaccuracy of its records.

That could then trigger doubts over the precision of Japanese statistics, which are largely synthesised from local records. Whenever Japan is confronted with an ugly view of itself, the analysis tends to focus on the decline of the family. Everything

from the high suicide rate and playground stabbings to the state of the economy fit into a theory that young Japanese do not like having their elderly parents under the same roof. Before the prevalence of the nuclear family, say the traditionalists, everyone would have known exactly where the centenarians were.

But that line, says Tahara, misses the point. The family structure of Japan was bound to change over time: any negative outcomes from that change are because of the government and the economy's failure to adapt.

When I speak to Mr Tahara he is fresh from discussing the crisis with the health minister, who admitted that without physical meetings, Japan will never know if its very elderly are alive or dead.

“This centenarian crisis arise from the same failure,” Tahara says. “Japan will never ask itself this basic question: do you want to take care of your parents, or do you want to pay taxes and let the state to do it?”