

Ms. Masuko FUJIKI Her Story: Just Graduated from University in Japan at Age 83

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My name is Masuko FUJIKI. I am 83 years old. I was born in Shanghai, China, and I came back to Japan at 5 years old. I grew up in the small town of Kuwana in Mie Prefecture in central Japan.



The author, Prof. Steve McCARTY at her graduation

I had valuable learning experiences from before to after World War II. In July 1945, a month before the end of World War II, my school and my house were bombed in an air raid. At that time I was a high school student, and some of my friends died by the bombs.

After the War, many people were suffering from lack of food and a shortage of housing. We resumed study in a temple instead of school.

In May 1948, the system started of educating boys and girls together in the same buildings and in the same classes. We enjoyed school life and studying. For example, I belonged to an alpine hiking club and English speaking club with friends.

I had an arranged marriage with my husband and lived in Kamakura, near Tokyo, for about 55 years. We have three daughters, two grandsons, three granddaughters and one great grandson.

We moved to Osaka in 2007 from Kamakura, but my husband soon died of a cerebral infarction, a type of stroke.

When I was a teenager I had a dream, which was to study at a university in English. Now I have just graduated from Osaka Jogakuin University on March 14, 2015. However, my English skill is poor. Yet when I was first year student, I handed in an illustration essay to the teacher, who commented on it, "Did you write all of this by yourself?" Of course because I live alone. However, my English grammar scores were not as good.

I enjoyed physical education during the first two years of university (around age 80). During a vacation, I joined a short-term study abroad program to Melbourne, Australia. It was a wonderful experience with a home stay.

My graduation project was titled "The Support System in Japan for the Care of the Elderly." I conducted a questionnaire survey with 20 care managers and home helpers. And I interviewed 5 family care givers. When we get old and care is necessary, we need to decide where to end our days. People will have two choices: the family home or an institution.

Japan is one of the fastest aging societies in the world. Therefore it is facing many medical and welfare issues.

COMMENTARY

Japanese people of all ages who were born on the Asian mainland, left over from military advances or for other reasons, have been returning to Japan from pre-War times until recently. Ms. FUJIKI's family returned in time to be bombed in the War. And yet, showing no bitterness, she learned from the experience and took an interest in the outside world through English. This is characteristic of many Japanese people who cherish their Peace Constitution.

From the early post-War period, with the American-guided Constitution guaranteeing equality of opportunity, females could vote and study alongside males at a relatively early stage, which contributed to Japan's rapid development. However, in Japan, custom is sometimes stronger than law. Most women of Ms.FUJIKI's generation had marriages arranged between families, whereas the practice is uncommon now and women are quite free in most ways.

She entered OJU at age 79 ("Jogakuin" means women's institute). OJU is known for its education, internationalism, and activism on behalf of oppressed minorities. The two-year college and university have been contributing to a children's hospital in Bangladesh for decades.

Almost all Japanese say their English is poor, but Ms. FUJIKI studied abroad and fulfilled the senior thesis requirements to graduate from OJU. Japan currently has the highest average age and proportion of elderly people, so her thesis research is of interest in Japan and globally as birthrates decline around the world.

HER GRADUATION AS NEWS

Ms. FUJIKI's graduation was reported in regional newspapers and on the NHK public TV news that evening. Parts of the graduation were filmed, with most students in colorful kimonos. The news value was perhaps that it was an unusual occurrence but representative of a growing new trend. Japanese education and business customs have been somewhat inflexible, like an escalator with steps representing people's age, in a set path from school to work.



Screen shot of Ms. FUJIKI's graduation reported on evening TV news

For example, reputable companies tend to hire only fresh university graduates, and anyone falling off the elevator to success may not be able to get back on track. But having more non-traditional graduates will tend to push the boundaries of what is possible in Japan. With a rapidly shrinking population, the talents of women, the elderly, foreigners, and non-traditional Japanese cannot be overlooked.