

Art of adding life to years

A sense of purpose and a reason to get out of bed help the Japanese stay young while growing old

I was roaming in a Tokyo park the other day when an old Japanese man, standing with a stick and carrying a camera with a long lens, beckoned me over. I decided to turn away, but he persisted, waving at me to come.

Pointing to something in the woods, he whispered in my ear that a special bird was among the trees. The man then showed me pictures he had taken of birds and flowers in the park.

He said that twice a week, with a lunchbox, he visits the place — which, with its name-plated plants,

big and small, is designed to teach children about nature. The journey from his home to the park takes him two hours by subway and bus.

Most of his photos were out of focus, but his passion touched my heart.

Whenever I visit parks in the Japanese capital, I always run into gray-haired, energetic amateur photographers and painters.

Japanese believe that a sense of purpose and a reason to jump out of bed each morning, or *ikigai* as they call it, help them live a long, healthy life. *Iki* means “life”, and *gai*

means “to be worthwhile”.

The Japanese have an average life expectancy of 83.7 years, outliving the rest of the global villagers. Their women, in particular, are incredibly resilient with an average life span of 86.8 years, ranking second after Hong Kong, according to the World Health Organization.

Two writers, Hector Garcia and Francesc Miralles, explored the secrets behind people in Japan staying young while growing old. They did their research in Japan, including interviews in Okinawa, which has the largest number of centenarians in the world.

In their coauthored book, *Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life*, Garcia and Miralles say nurturing friendships, eating light meals, getting enough rest, and doing regular, moderate exercise are all part of the equation of good health. But at the heart of the *joie de vivre* that inspires the centenarians to keep celebrating birthdays and cherishing each new day is their *ikigai*.

One surprising thing I notice is how active people remain after they retire. In fact, many Japanese people never really retire — they keep doing what they love for as long as their health allows.

A Japanese friend of mine, Michio Hamaji, worked in the Middle East before retirement. Now the 70-something man is freelancing

as a consultant for two companies. I wonder where his energy comes from.

Japanese men are breadwinners for their families. They are remote people who disappear in the morning and reappear at night.

Jeff Kingston, director of Asian Studies at Temple University's Japan Campus, in Tokyo, said Japanese people can find the transition away from being worker drones very difficult as they have not nurtured networks outside of their jobs and are often strangers in their neighborhoods and, in some cases, their families.

Studies show that losing one's sense of purpose can have a detrimental effect. For instance, those who lose their *raison d'être* at retirement become more prone to contracting illnesses.

The issue for Japanese people is too much work.

The country's unemployment rate was at 2.8 percent in December, the lowest level since 1993. It is said that jobs are available as long as people in Japan want to work.

Japanese government data showed that about 4.3 million people, or 8 percent of the Japanese labor force, worked more than 60 hours a week last year. With a standard workweek of 40 hours, those workers are putting in more than 20 hours of weekly overtime.

Fathering Japan, a nonprofit

organization, aims to help dads spend less time at the office and more time with their families.

A package of work-style reforms that will address the chronically long working hours of company employees is expected to be submitted for deliberation at the ongoing sessions of Japan's Parliament, or Diet.

Despite the culture of working long hours, which drives some people to commit suicide, most Japanese survive and live a long life. Studies have found that purposefulness is one of the strongest predictors of longevity and passion brings meaning to life.

In Japanese culture, retiring and not keeping your mind and body busy is seen as being bad for your health since it disconnects your soul from your *ikigai*, writer Garcia said.

Noriaki Kasai's *ikigai* is working hard to keep the Japanese ski-jump legend's athletic career going as long as possible. Kasai made history in Pyeongchang, South Korea, last week by competing in his eighth Winter Olympics at the age of 45.

He made his Olympic debut at Albertville in 1992 — the last time that the Winter Games were held the same year as the Summer Games — and won his first Olympic medal at Lillehammer in 1994, taking silver in the team event. He

won a silver medal on the large hill and a bronze medal in the team event at Sochi in 2014. He fell short in Pyeongchang with his best result coming in the team event on Feb 19, helping Japan reach sixth place.

But Kasai said he has no plans to hang up his skis anytime soon. Back in Japan on Feb 20, he said he is eyeing the next Winter Games, in Beijing in 2022, and is determined to win another medal.

Failing to win a medal in Pyeongchang seems to have motivated Kasai to make a run at what would be his ninth straight Olympic appearance. If he does in fact compete, Kasai will be 49 years old.

Ken Mogi, a neuroscientist and writer, argued in his 2017 book, *The Little Book of Ikigai: The Essential Japanese Way to Finding Your Purpose in Life*, that it does not matter whether “you are a cleaner of the famous Shinkansen bullet train, the mother of a newborn child, or a Michelin-starred sushi chef — if you can find pleasure and satisfaction in what you do and you're good at it, congratulations, you have found your *ikigai*”.

Ikigai hides in everyone. Have you found yours?

The author is China Daily's bureau chief in Tokyo. caihong@chinadaily.com.cn

Games pave way for peninsula talks

Winter Olympics spur momentum for the US to initiate dialogue with the DPRK on denuclearization

By YOON YOUNG-KWAN

After some two years of rising tensions on the Korean Peninsula, the reprieve brought by the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang in the Republic of Korea (ROK) is more than welcome. However, complacency is not an option.

After years of accelerated missile development, which culminated in successful tests of intercontinental ballistic missiles and, as it claims, a hydrogen bomb last year, the nuclear program by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has become not only a threat to its neighbors, but also to the United States. The response of US President Donald Trump's administration — which has included unprecedented saber-rattling — has

escalated tensions further.

Yet, on Jan 1, DPRK leader Kim Jong-un called for better relations with the ROK, before agreeing on the DPRK's participation in the Olympics. What accounts for Kim's sudden move to extend an olive branch to the ROK?

Since coming to power in 2011, Kim has been committed to the *byungjin* policy that emphasizes the parallel goals of economic development and a robust nuclear weapons program. With one of those goals now ostensibly achieved, Kim has shifted his focus to securing new economic opportunities for the DPRK's sanctions-battered economy.

Kim now seems to have decided that his best hope for boosting the DPRK's economy, without reversing progress on its nuclear weapons

program, is to weaken the international coalition enforcing the sanctions. His campaign has begun with the ROK, and an attempt to drive a wedge between that country and its US ally and potentially even to convince it to abandon the alliance altogether.

But the ROK is unlikely to be fooled so easily. Since his inauguration last May, President Moon Jae-in has realized that he needed to find a way to mitigate the existential threat of nuclear war. So he decided to treat the Winter Olympics as an opportunity not only to defuse tensions on the Korean Peninsula but also to spur momentum for dialogue on denuclearization.

Moon himself made it clear in January that no improvement in the ROK's relationship with the DPRK will be possible without

denuclearization. Indeed, his efforts to open a dialogue with the DPRK seem to be driven by cool diplomatic realism, not naive idealism.

As for the US, its take on these developments reflects a mixture of skepticism and expectation. Trump has expressed support for the effort, but Washington remains concerned about any potential strain on the US' alliance with the ROK.

More dangerously, some US policymakers continue to entertain the possibility of giving the DPRK a “bloody nose” — a decision that could cost hundreds of thousands of lives.

To help prevent this outcome, and with Kim refusing to discuss denuclearization, Moon now must figure out how to build up the intra-Korean dialogue to enable talks

between the DPRK and the US.

Ultimately though, it is Trump who needs to seize the opportunity to initiate talks. The fact is that, despite their importance, sanctions alone cannot bring about the outcome desired by the US or its allies.

Talks are needed, if only to try to find out the DPRK's true intentions. For that, the Trump administration will need to move beyond the “maximum pressure” it has promised and get started on the “engagement” that it also acknowledges will be indispensable to forging a solution.

The author is a professor emeritus of international relations, Seoul National University.

Source: chinausfocus.com