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# Engaged Aging: Longer Working Lives in Japan

A hybrid *u:japan* lecture by Iza Kavedžija

Thursday  
2026-05-21  
18<sup>00</sup>~19<sup>30</sup>



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Longevity is variously conceived as an ideal and a social good, but also as a considerable social problem. As people live longer lives, questions of work, productivity, and dependence increasingly come to structure debates about ageing. In the context of Japan, which has often been described as a ‘super-aged society’, these questions are particularly acute; increasing numbers of people participate both in the voluntary sector and, more recently, in the workforce, often well beyond the conventional age of retirement. Based on ethnographic research conducted in 2019 and 2025 in the Kansai region of Japan, including interviews with people aged 65 and over, observations at senior employment fairs, job centres, and local organisations, I explore some of the motivations for working that older people shared with me, both remunerated and unremunerated.

On the one hand, work in its various forms may serve as a source of meaning in later years and offer ways to remain socially engaged. For some, work provides sociality, routine, and a

sense of contribution at a time when other roles may be receding.

At the same time, work is a necessity for many, shaped by insufficient pensions, insecure livelihoods, and limited opportunities to withdraw from paid labour. Drawing on the work of Jennifer Johnson Hanks (2002), I reconsider the role of ‘retirement’ in the framing of older age as a life stage in Japan, treating retirement not as a stable analytical category but as an increasingly uneven and contested transition. While retirement has long structured expectations about later life, it is gradually becoming a luxury available to ever smaller numbers of people, rendering older age more heterogeneous and less predictable. Attending to everyday experiences of work and the affective relations to time and future they engender, the paper complicates normative ideals of ‘active’ or ‘successful’ ageing. Rather than emphasizing choice or motivation alone, it highlights endurance, ambivalence, and perseverance as central features of working longer lives.



**Dr. Iza Kavedžija** is an Associate Professor of Medical Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. Prior to joining the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge in 2021 she has held posts at the University of Exeter and University of Oxford. She has written on topics including care, wellbeing and creativity. In recent years, Iza has been working on multimodal methods in anthropology and is currently a PI on a British Academy Talent Development Award, *The Ethnographic Portfolio: Arts-based methods for anthropology*. She is the Editor-in-Chief of the journal *Anthropology and Aging* and has recently co-founded the research network *Precarious Aging: Critical Concepts*, funded by CRASSH. Her book publications include *Meaning in Life: Tales from Aging Japan* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); *Values of Happiness: Toward an Anthropology of Purpose in Life* (with Harry Walker, University of Chicago Press, 2016); and *The Process of Wellbeing: Conviviality, Care, Creativity* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

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[ujapanlectures.ostasien@univie.ac.at](mailto:ujapanlectures.ostasien@univie.ac.at)