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Creating a new life through persimmon leaves the art of searching for life-design for greater well-being in a depopulated town

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Nanami Suzuki

生のつながりへの想像力 5
(Series on Imagining Relatedness of Life 5)

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Nanami Suzuki*

I. Introduction—Towards Research on Life-design for Well-being in Modern Aging Society

Increasing attention is being paid nowadays to how to care for others, especially the aged. With the rapid graying of society -- a common situation observed in most advanced nations -- concern is mounting about how to manage such care. Japan, since 1994, has witnessed the emergence of the so-called “aged society,” with 14-21% of the population aged 65 or older (after having experienced an “aging society” with 7-14% of the aged), and it is estimated that a “super-aged society” will emerge in half a century (1).

Looking at such data, we are concerned about how aging will affect society and the economy, and whether the younger generation can support seniors. Much of that worry seems to stem from the sense that families have lost the ability to care for their own older members, with newspapers often reporting on “how to supplement the function of the family” (2). The progress of aging in society causes much worry, with the elderly left isolated without sufficient help. As Japanese youth increasingly seek work in the city, a growing number of aged people are forced to live alone in depopulated areas. That means that younger people, too, must manage to live by themselves, bringing up their children in crowded towns or cities (3). There are frequently reports of depopulated towns or villages in Japan falling into a critical situation, with the natural environment of the area being destroyed.

Meanwhile, various efforts have been made to deal with the situation, such as *la fete des voisins* (“festival of neighbors”), first held in Paris in 1999. That movement started when people were struck by the fact that an aged person had died unnoticed in the very apartment building where they lived, and began to have small gatherings in the courtyard of the building, having snacks and beverages together to get acquainted. Since 2003, when a heat wave killed 15,000 people, that kind of gathering has become more popular, and they are held now in a thousand cities in 29 countries (4). These days, the meeting place not only serves the isolated elderly, but also young parents, who help each other in case of need.

Thus, the concern about the advance of the aging society, with communities losing their capacity, has unexpectedly given us a chance to reconsider how to create the time and space for people of all generations to enjoy together, and to use for their own

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needs.

In order to consider good living, or “well-being,” in time and space, we need the opportunity to discuss how it can be realized.

The English word “well-being” corresponds with the word *fukushi* (“welfare”) in Japanese, which has been used in the sense of “good living” since the 14th century. Originally describing the state of human beings (as well as that of the community) in a “good condition,” *fukushi* does not simply express the limited meaning of “welfare” as caring for people in times of adversity (poverty, weakness and illness, etc.). With the emergence of the “police” (*polis*) in 17th and 18th century Europe, however, the English term “welfare” gained a narrower meaning: that of the government extending professional assistance in the fields of education, medicine, peace and civil order, as part of social services [Terasaki 2000: 43].

In the 20th century, “well-being” started to be used in the meaning of “good condition” in one’s everyday life, as clearly written in the draft of the Charter of the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1946. There, “health” is described as being “in a good condition,” not just as “not being ill” [Kimura 2006: 16-20].

However, when “well-Being” was translated as *fukushi* when the Convention of the Rights of the Child was ratified in 1994 in Japan, it still gave the impression of help being extended in a unilateral direction to prepare the environment for a person, rather than making full use of that person’s wishes in his or her everyday life.

To lead one’s life “in a good condition,” everyone needs to search for his or her “well-being”, or quality of life. That search begins when a person reconsiders his or her lifestyle and wishes. I believe that the first thing that people must do is to search for their own well-being. In Fukui Prefecture, for example, census figures show that greater satisfaction in people’s lives leads to higher regional indicators (5).

This paper will consider specific factors affecting a community, by focusing on how “common people” as well as professionals in a certain local area reconsider their well-being as a whole, and take part in modifying the community.

The paper looks at the process of promoting a new industry based on local resources in Kamikatsu, a depopulated town of about 2,000 inhabitants on the Japanese island of Shikoku, based on research and interviews that took place starting in 2004 (6). I will also explore the changes in lifestyles experienced by the old people living in the town, and the effects of the changes on the attitudes of townsfolk and newcomers of other generations, with new ideas for the town.

Earlier literature on the subject is as follows:

Nanami Suzuki (the author of this paper) conducted a basic study concerning the aging society and the well-being of people from various generations [Suzuki 2005].

First, she examined historical changes in the thoughts about the lifecycle. As shown in the “the stairway of life” that first appeared in medieval western society, adults

became recognized as the “norm,” while the elderly and children became peripheral, considered only as acceptors of care by the adult generation. My paper shows that these changes are related in some extent to the situation in adults expected to support their family and work as caregivers.

Secondly, however, in modern society, we can see that working adults always view at their own lifestyles and design their own time using the concept of work-sharing, as observed in a certain region in Switzerland. That practice seems to give people more time to communicate with people of other generations in a local community. In Denmark, where more importance has historically been attached to leisure activities as activating the power of the local community, especially since the 19th century, many people of all generations have been encouraged to join leisure activities. People often think about how they use time, trying to shorten their working hours, and enjoying various leisure activities after 3:00 or 4:00 p.m. [Suzuki 2007].

Thirdly, based on fieldwork conducted in 2005, the paper examines the process by which elderly people in Kamikatsu Town have continued to make use of their abilities and the resources of the region, culminating in the promotion of a new industry. One of the reasons for the attempt's success was that it matched well with the nature of seniors in Japan, who, according to a government-run survey and an international comparative study attach greater importance to earning income and not relying totally on their children (7).

Based on those three aspects, the paper points out that each townspeople would give power to the local community when he or she thinks about his or her well-being, not clinging to generational or gender-based norms or roles that are historically and culturally constructed.

Masaaki Ooe has introduced the practice of Kamikatsu Town, showing how townsfolk and the local government have worked together to find strategies to make use of the resources of the region. He has termed the attempts of Kamikatsu Town as "welfare promoted by industry" [Ooe 2008].

Meanwhile, Yoshito Honma has insisted on the importance of promoting primary industries in a region as a way to halt depopulation, and introduced Kamikatsu Town as an example of that model. He focused on the government's designation of special districts of structural reform as an attempt to avoid restrictions in certain fields to stimulate the administration of local districts. He also examined the reconstruction of regions carried out both by local governments and the local population.

This paper examines how people, no matter if they have lived in a community for a while or came only recently, get access to other people, and how they acquire the means to express their wishes and ideas about their lives in the town. In other words, I describe the essential of living together with a sense of well-being.

II. Promotion of Industrial Development in a Depopulated Town

Kamikatsu Town, is situated in the SE (southeastern) part of the Shikoku Mountains in Tokushima Prefecture, 40km from Tokushima City, the prefectural capital. Most of the area is mountainous except for a little level ground. People live between an altitude of 100-700m in small villages, and terraced fields can be seen on the hillside slopes [Kamikatsucho. A History of Kamikatsucho. 2005].

Kamikatsu had the population of 2,179 in March 2005 (Kamikatsucho. Green Information. 2005: 20). Census statistics show the population peaked out at about 6,000 in 1955, and decreased every year since until reaching equilibrium in 2000.

The percentage of old people is about 45%, that is, 990 people over 65 years old. Thus, Kamikatsu Town is the smallest town on Shikoku that has experienced depopulation and rapid aging.

However, these days, this town has received a number of people coming from the cities to live in this town, as well as those who were born in this town, moved to cities to work, then returned to their hometown. In Japan, these phenomena are described as “I-turn” and “U-turn,” respectively. Between 1985 and 2005, there were 80 households, or 160 people, that either returned to Kamikatsu after moving away or moved there for the first time, and 15 children were born in such households (8). Still more remarkable was that some of the elderly, especially women, got jobs and started to pay tax.

Those changes began when an economic crisis was experienced in this town. After Japan's period of rapid economic growth, in the 1970s and 1980s, the sales of the main products of the town -- timber and tangerines -- were on the decrease, with an increase in imported products and products from other parts of Japan. Even worse, in February 1981, the tangerine orchards that had supported people's lives were completely destroyed by a cold wave. Although the townspeople had tried to cultivate rice, wheat, sweet potatoes, butterburs, and strawberries on the scarce level ground, they had a hard time, and some even had a nervous breakdown.

There, both the young and old have joined forces in establishing new industries to survive. Kamikatsu's inhabitants, led by an agricultural cooperative and the newly-developed third sector (i.e. neither public nor private) have tried to create a new industry suitable to the town.

One of the third-sector leaders -- the first outsider to work for this town -- got the idea of picking seasonal leaves of various colors and shapes and providing them to Japanese restaurants and stores preparing fancy lunch boxes. Once, when he had supper alone at a Japanese restaurant after finishing his work in Kyoto, he saw two women enjoying dishes garnished with seasonal leaves. At that moment, he realized that people highly regarded food served in a way that was pleasant to the eye.

The work of finding, picking and packing leaves to meet the demand was not so hard, and was thus suitable for the elderly. First, the old people were reluctant to follow

the idea, because they did not want to waste their time picking leaves when they had much greater skill and experience in growing tangerine trees. However, the industry was successful beyond everyone's expectations. City-dwelling customers now enjoy dishes decorated with beautiful leaves, and willingly pay for them as well (Fig. 1).

In 2005, 19 years since the beginning of the industry, townsfolk produced 300 kinds of leaves and earned more than 250 million yen, or about two million dollars in total. The leaves from this town make up more than 80% of all the leaves traded in the central wholesale market in Osaka.

Some 177 farming families became members of the sector, and the average age of the workers was 68 in 2005. Many producers earn 200,000 to 300,000 yen, and some even make more than a million yen a month (Fig. 2, Fig. 3).

III. Increase in Accessibility and Changes in Old People's Lives

1. Drawing Upon the Abilities of the Aged

Townspeople came up with various ideas for adapting the system for old people to use.

First, the third-sector leaders made use of the existing system of wireless telegraphy for dealing with disasters, as well as fax machines, for sending information about what kind of leaves were needed to all registrants at a time. If a producer judged that he or she could supply sufficient leaves of the kind within a set period, he or she would then enter into a contract with the sector by making a phone call.

Second, the leaders developed a computer system for the old people and lent it to them (Fig. 4). It is easy for old people to see the information presented in big letters and bright colors on a screen, and to make their decision by simply pressing the Enter key. Every action can be made by handling a big trackball with the palm, rather than by clicking the mouse. Thus, with a computer set up specifically for them, they can easily get access to any information they need, such as deciding which leaves to pick and when to sell them.

They enjoy checking how much they have earned, their earnings rankings, and which leaves are popular at the time. Some even declare that the purpose of their lives is now having information and communicating with others through the computer.

Third, making use of volunteer-run, fare-charging taxis in town, old people who do not drive can also deliver their boxed leaves safely to an agricultural cooperative by the fixed time of 1:00 p.m.

Kamikatsu Town applied to the government to develop the original system of helping aged and disabled people to move around town with volunteer-run, fare-charging taxis. This so-called "Project in Special District of Transportation with Fare-charging Volunteers" was approved through the government's policy of "Special Districts in Structural Reform" starting in May 2003, and the volunteer taxis have operated since

October of that year.

2. Changes in the Lives of the Aged

The development of the industry has had an effect on the life of old people. Many expressed that they lead better lives with a sense of hope, thanks to this “easy, clean work.”

First, the industry has given them enjoyment. The aged, especially the housewives who comprise the core of the workforce gathering and packing leaves, have experienced many changes in their lives. For the first time, they have jobs of their own, and can now use the extra money for whatever they want, such as giving their grandchildren an allowance when they visit Kamikatsu and making more frequent visits to their children who live in cities.

Second, they can use money for the future. Some have cultivated new trees that can produce popular beautiful leaves. Ms. H., 84 years old in 2005, who has worked for the industry from the beginning, planted persimmon trees for the future in the spring of 2005. She is looking forward to picking the leaves of the new trees in 2008, when she reaches 87 years old. Now the leaves are regarded as a piece of work to be created. The elderly originally from the region are happy to think about the effect of such factors as altitude, sunlight, and soil on their leaves. They now think of the mountainous land as an advantage in getting colorful leaves. Producers have been busy getting ideas and planning new products for their special leaves, filled with hope for the future. They often say that “the whole town is a showcase of their products.”

Third, the old people have had more chance to communicate with others and feel themselves as independent persons in the community. With the help of a computer, telephone and fax machine, they can work from home. They also wait for news related to the industry in a newspaper printed by Mr. Y, a leader of the third sector.

Some people enjoy meeting with others while they pack the leaves together. Several times a year, they go on a bus tour to Japanese restaurants in Kyoto to see their leaves being used. They can enjoy delicious good food and see for themselves how their leaves are being used.

Thanks to the volunteer-run, fare-charging taxis running in the town, they don't hesitate to go out and see each other at a meeting room located in a recently-renovated hotel run by Kamikatsu, for the purpose of exchanging new ideas. Those ideas will come in handy for an ongoing new project to energize the town.

Both at home and outside, old people are not alone anymore. These days, people come to meetings on time, and are no more criticized as being on “Awa Time,” that is, not being very punctual (9). People began to design their use of time more seriously, because they have much to plan and do in the future.

In 2005, only two old people were bedridden anymore. Kamikatsu took the 32th

place in the medical expenses among all towns in Tokushima prefecture that was known to have developed large scale facilities for the aged. This fact suggests that the creation of new industry that answered the needs of the aged had a possibility to contribute to their health and that this activity also consists a factor of “caring”.

IV. Ongoing New Project to Energize Kamikatsu

1. Plans for New Projects

The changes in their everyday lives experienced by the old people have also benefited the other people in town.

In the process, people in general, not just the “young” or the “old,” have thought about how to make a common dream come true.

The townsfolk have become accustomed to reconsidering the place in which they live, and are more willing to give their opinions about their everyday lives. Many opportunities have been created for everyone to express their ideas relating to the life of the town.

Since 1993, the “1Q” (Ikkyu) Athlete Meet has been held, named after the famous Buddhist priest “Ikkyu,” who loved to hold dialogs in the form of questions and answers in order to get good ideas. The meet has given everyone in town a chance to express opinions as to how to make the town a better place to live and visit.

Since 1995, the town has been divided in five zones, each of which has a committee of six members, two of whom must be women. These members are expected to present new ideas as well as solutions concerning the zone in which they live.

According to one leader of a private-public enterprise, all these projects have been planned for the purpose of heightening people’s desire to make better a life for their community.

Furthermore, the townsfolk, who once did not welcome strangers into their community, began beckoning newcomers to come from the outside. They built new low-rent apartments for the use of newcomers to lead comfortable lives in the town. That also meant the use of local timber, one of the resources in the town, which has promoted forestry. It is now the timber industry’s moment in the sun, so to speak.

2. Newcomers Coming to the Town

1) People Returning to the Town after Working in Cities

People who were born in Kamikatsu and later moved to work in cities now consider the merit of returning to their hometown. Ms. S., 80, has worked producing leaves at home, and her husband began to help her once retiring from his work as a carpenter. They have renovated their house, and are waiting for their son in his fifties, who works as a carpenter in K city, to come back to live with his family.

Ms. S. and her husband expect that the characteristic knowledge of the resources of the region will thus be handed down to the next generation, once they return from the cities.

2) People Moving to Kamikatsu from the Outside

There are also young people living in the town who have moved there from outside, and who now work together with the townspeople in several fields.

First, several of such young people now work together at a new job with the housewives and old people in town. For example, some run a shop selling a small amount of vegetables, home-made side dishes, and Japanese confectioneries that are characteristic of the region. If such people make a lot of food, they provide it to shops, selling it with labels identifying the name of the producer (Fig. 5). Some producers enjoy also providing information about the region, the source of ingredients, and recipes for eating edible wild plants that city dwellers might be happy to learn.

Since 2000, young salesmen and women who belong to an organization called "Collaborators for a Green Hometown" have been dispatched to Kamikatsu for a year at a time by a non-profit organization (NPO) in Tokyo called the "Center for the Greening of the Earth." Kamikatsu provides them with low-rent apartments in a wooden building and ¥600,000 a year each for their living expenses. Some 17 young people have been sent there so far, with six of them settling permanently. Ms. A. is one of the permanent settlers, choosing to do so because people often talk to her and she can talk about various topics with them, unlike her experience in Tokyo.

Second, several of the young people who moved to Kamikatsu for the first time have taken the lead in establishing ways to recycle. The townsfolk did not want to waste tax money either buying an incinerator or asking another town to dispose of their waste materials. They solicited, over the Internet, someone who could help them develop a good system of recycling for the town, and they received an application from a young woman (born in 1981) from Tokyo who had learned many ways of recycling in Denmark. She has lived in Kamikatsu since the summer of 2004.

She and the townsfolk formed an NPO called "Zero Waste Academy," and have developed a system to separate rubbish according to categories. Following her directions, the townsfolk have come to separate their rubbish at the Hibiya Recycle Center. Now the rate of recycling in Kamikatsu is 80%, compared to just 9% overall in Japan, and they think they can bring it up to 100% by 2020 (Fig. 6).

Kamikatsu has been known for its efforts to recycle garbage to become a "clean town," which will enhance its image of growing "beautiful leaves." The town also publishes journals called "Kurukuru," a Japanese word describing a circular motion, to introduce its "eco-life," giving information to the townsfolk about how to make small articles from waste materials.

Nowadays, the recycle center has become a kind of community center. A place called "Hidamari" (meaning a "cozy place in the sun") has been set up next to the center as a meeting place, as well as a facility for caring for and preventing senility, etc. There, seniors enjoy learning how to use personal computers, making new shirts, bags and hats out of material recycled at the center, as well as *koinobori* carp streamers.

In addition, there has been a "working Holiday" program since 2005, with 101 young people participating, four of whom moved to the town permanently in 2008.

Kamikatsu also offers urban dwellers the chance to own a *tanada* or "terraced field" in the town. At the *Tanada*, famous throughout Japan for its beautiful scenery, summer outdoor concerts have been held for the townsfolk and visitors to enjoy.

Most people in the town welcome the returnees and the newcomers, and enjoy the communication among the people in various life stages and from different places.

However, they do not have a vision of making Kamikatsu a "big town" or a tourist spot.

In order to realize their vision for the town, they are trying to find out how the factors once considered disadvantages of the depopulated town have turned into advantages more recently.

V. Conclusion

The paper looks at the changes in lifestyle of old people in a depopulated town after taking part in the promotion of a new industry. It focuses on how they get access to their work, and how they became the central figures thinking of their own "well-being" closely related to that of the community in which they live.

I also explored the effects of the changes on the attitudes of townsfolk of other generations, including newcomers, with their new ideas for the town.

The paper then examines how each person, no matter how long he or she has lived in the town, gets access to others, and thereby acquires the means to express his or her wishes and ideas about their lives. That is the essential art of living together in conformity – so-called "well-being".

At first, caring for the aged was not the main purpose of the people in Kamikatsu. A new industry was developed for the survival of all the townspeople economically, and that drastically changed the lives of elderly.

Those changes also affected the lives of townsfolk of other generations. They came up with various ideas to increase the accessibility of elderly to accomplish their work, such as using computers to get the information they needed, and utilizing volunteer-run taxis to deliver their products. Those inventions, at the same time, increased the opportunities for people to communicate with each other, not just the aged but people of other generations as well.

The old people got a feeling of happiness and well-being not just through the

money they earned, but also because of social and cultural factors, such as their place in their family and community.

Having gained confidence in their own ability, townsfolk had refined their managerial skills. Furthermore, they have begun to innovate in the town together with the companions with whom they got acquainted when doing business together. They took part in the “Ikkyu” movement to present their ideas to reform the town. That movement has served as a new stage upon which they serve as an asset to their community, other than simply being successful in their business.

The townsfolk have also served as members of committees of separate zones in the town to carry out projects to improve the town’s natural environment as well. In that process, they have begun to collaborate with the people from the outside, so as to make use of the personnel and material resources of the town.

The new vision of Kamikatsu Town has attracted outsiders to come work with the townsfolk and finally to settle there. Many young people from the outside felt in tune with those ideas, and came to live and participate in designing a place where they want to lead their lives. They also found the venue to express their beliefs and wishes about their own well-being.

The cultural exchange between the young newcomers and the townsfolk has led to ideas for new products characteristic of the town, stemming from the recycling efforts. Those efforts also provided new spaces for communication. People have created a new interrelationship that is, and always will be, in a phase of transition.

In the end, the townspeople learned to consider the place in which they live, getting ready to express ideas about their everyday lives. There are many opportunities for everyone to express ideas about living in the town, and people acquire the common feeling that their ideas will surely change Kamikatsu. The townsfolk of Kamikatsu noticed that it was not only economics or governmental administration that gave people power to think about the future, but also the time they had for pleasure, often on the occasion of a new event. That let them think about how to spend their time and money for their well-being.

In Kamikatsu Town, the promotion of a new industry for survival led to the promotion of greater well-being or welfare. Based on the experiences of hardships in depopulated areas and the success of an industry characteristic to the place, people began to live to create their own well-being, a process that always involves the crossing of various borders.

Caring works only when everything moves in cycles in conformity with the setting and situation of the people who live in a certain place. It lies in bringing out the ability of everyone, integrating and cultivating it to cope with the situation that is capable of taking on new aspects at any time in future.

To design a space to live together, it is absolutely necessary to get the point of

view of every common person living there, and he or she must always be ready to act as an actor in the spotlight, or as a producer or a director, in the play that is performed on the stage of the community.

In Kamikatsu, the seniors who were the first generation to take the initiative in creating new industry, having acted as the main characters as well as the producers, will soon reach their 90's. The townsfolk will surely continue to talk with each other how to reach the next stage in creating a better good community.

I will continue to observe the developments in Kamikatsu Town, as well as exchange information with the people working there. I will also find out precisely how to apply my research results in order to think about ways for people to live together amidst the situation of expanding multiculturalism in the modern aging society.

Notes

- 1) "An Estimate of the Prospects of Population in Japan," January 2002. [Takahashi 2005: 25]
- 2) For example, one newspaper headline reads, "Toward a country of great happiness, isolated elderly are increasing, how to supplement the functions of the family." [Asahi Shimbun, July 3, 2005]
- 3) According to a survey on social isolation in several advanced nations, Japanese were the most socially isolated, in that they don't see so many people besides friends, colleagues, and family members [OECD 2005]. Hiroi pointed out that Japanese tend to draw a rigid border between their inner circle, recognized often as a family circle or colleagues, and others. While they have intimate relationships in their inner circle, they are indifferent or even hostile to "others." [Hiroi 2006: 204-214]
- 4) In 2008, people held such gatherings for the first time in Japan at Shinjuku Ward in Tokyo and Kobe City in Hyogo Prefecture.
- 5) According to statistics, Fukui Prefecture, known for its high technology industries of textiles and machinery, has the lowest unemployment rate of Japan (2005 census), the highest rate of the possession of cars and cellular phones per household, the third highest amount of household savings (2004), the highest rate of full employment for women (2005 census), and the second highest birthrate in Japan at 1.50 (average rate is 1.3 in Japan as a whole). [Asahi Shimbun, May 8, 2008]
- 6) Since the year of 2004, I have collected information and materials of Kamikatsu town. I conducted the interviews and participant fieldwork research in 2005, and since then I kept in touch with the people by exchanging letters and e-mails.
- 7) A government-run survey on attitudes about senior citizens' lifestyles has revealed that old people, above all, do not want to rely totally on their children. Opinion of Senior Citizens in Japan on the Important Roles of the Elderly: First, to live independently ([not

wanting to rely totally on their children, either on other people (64.6%); Second, to become an advisor for family members or relatives (20.6%); Third, to contribute to the local community (The Ministry of public Management: 202).

According to an international comparative study on the traits of the aged in five countries, the elderly in Japan have a tendency to attach greater importance to having a paid job, getting along well with their neighbors, and communicating with others by exchanging presents. On the other hand, in other countries, German senior citizens preferred spending time with one's friends, while those in the United States and Thailand attached importance to participating in religious activities, and Korean elders took seriously the accumulation of property. [Yuzawa 2003: 176]

8) "Tokushima, a Place of the Decrease in Population," Tokushima Newspaper. 5 May, 2005.

9) "Awa" is the name of the region and people of the region have been known as often being late for appointments.

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Figures:

Fig. 1 Dish decorated with a cherry blossom (*botanzakura*) and azalea in spring (at a hotel run by Kamikatsu town, 2005)



Fig. 2 Producer, age 84, packing her scarlet-tinges maple leaves



Fig. 3 Producer, age 74, preparing her bamboo leaves



Fig. 4 Getting access to information regarding leaves and flowers with a computer set up specifically for the aged

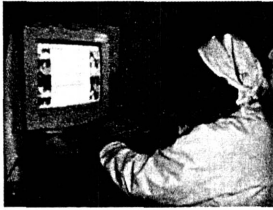
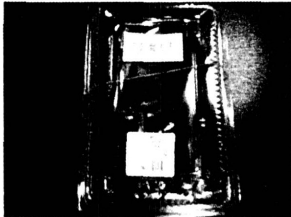


Fig. 5 Side dishes sold in the local products store



rice cakes decorated with leaves



steamed rice with red beans

Fig. 6 Collection of garbage by category

