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Pak Hang, Eric TANG

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The High Street for Elderly: Visiting Japanese Silver Hair Market

Eric Tang | Translation: Tony Lai
Photography: Eric Tang

The arising elderly group is slowly transforming our society, bringing both challenges and opportunities simultaneously. There is a new form of economy targeted at the elderly consumers.

Japan is not only leading the global youth trends, such as Harajuku of Tokyo – the renowned conglomerate of trendy boutiques for youngsters, but it also leads the trend of the ageing population. Would there be a “Harajuku” for the elderly, silver-haired? Sugamo, a neighbourhood in Toshima, Tokyo, has a shopping street named Jizo-dori, which is well known in Japan for being the “Harajuku of the old ladies” (おばあちゃんの原宿). We shall now walk you through this special shopping area.

Finding routes could sometimes be difficult, especially for elderly. Yet Jizo-dori Shopping Street is very convenient to reach. Taking the JR Yamanote Line to Sugamo Station, it only takes you a 5-minute walk to reach your destination following the sign. You will see benches along the way.

On the street it is not difficult to spot platoons of the silver-haired army in smart clothing. Following them you will arrive at the Jizo-dori Shopping Street with one-kilometre stretch. At the gate welcoming your visit is the cute duck mascot “Sugamon.” Adjacent to the figure is an amplified “duck-bum,” and it is rumoured that by rubbing which will help you find your love. Designing a lovely mascot for places of older adults can break the traditional stereotype of the elderly of being both stern and solemn, and undoubtedly energise the silver hair market.

Enjoy Creative Shopping

On both sides of the streets are shops selling daily necessities such as eyeglasses and medicine. There are also shops selling fashions, handicrafts, and snacks of the gray-headed people. Being the trend-leading silver hair market, specialty shopping is definitely a must-have item! You will find many shops in Sugamo selling “red knickers” which symbolize good luck. Though shocked, who can resist from having luck? Yet, since there have been more tourists visiting the street, the shops now also sell panties with cartoon prints on them or mini versions of the signature lucky charm, and I highly recommend them as souvenirs!
Try New Style Food

The elderly could not only go shopping like the Youngers do, but also dress-up to catch up with the latest trend on the one hand, or to refresh their memories through traditional treats on the other. Talking about food, besides preserving traditions, this shopping street has gradually evolved. Some new restaurants selling western cuisines and fast food has already found their way on the street, and some of the old shops have also started to modernise their signboard to give a lively image. Since many older adults are more willing to try new dishes, what’s your opinion?

Experience Various Social Welfare Activities

Besides shopping and enjoying delicious food, you could also pay a visit to the famous Kou-kan Temple, which is featuring both modern and classical styles. It is said that if you water the Ksitigarbha (とげぬき地蔵), your sickness will be cured. Would you try it?

You may also find various social service facilities, such as community centre and consultation centre. You may also find notice boards promoting activities for all ages and exhibitions about the history of the shopping street. The elderly could improve daily life skills while having entertainment, in other words, killing two birds with one stone.

I was lucky to have witnessed a local group of primary students led by their teachers to visit Jizo-dori. The field trip attempted to understand the active life of the elderly. The students talked to the elderly and asked about their health and wellbeing, as well as how they live their lives after retirement. The children were so enthusiastic that even the passengers could feel the atmosphere of “intergenerational harmony.”

Above is a brief introduction of Jizo-dori. If you want to know more about this marvellous place, why not plan a trip to explore it by yourself?