Resting place: Mount Obasute in Nagano Prefecture gets its name from being the place where, in ancient times, old people were carried to and abandoned to starve. The practice is known as *obasute* — literally, "throwing grandma away."

**Aging through the ages**

*From being accorded the highest Confucian respect to being left to die, the historical lot of Japan's elderly makes an eye-opening tale*

By MICHAEL HOFFMAN

"If only, when one heard That Old Age was coming One could bolt the door Answer 'not at home' And refuse to meet him!" (Anonymous, "Kokinshu" Imperial poetry anthology, 10th century)

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Once upon a time there was a ruler who hated old people. Any of his subjects who lived past 70 he banished. A minister of the country loved his aging mother and could not bear to be parted from her. When she turned 70, he dug a secret underground chamber in his house and hid her in it.
Years passed. One day a neighboring state sent two nearly identical horses — not as a gift but as a threat, for failure to answer a riddle connected with the horses would result in a deadly attack. The riddle was, Which of the two is the parent, which the offspring?

The ruler appealed to his minister, who promised to think of something. He knew who might have an answer — his mother, still in her secret cell. "She is old; she may have heard of something like this." Indeed she had. "Place grass between them," she advised. "The one who steps back and lets the other eat first is the parent."

Other riddles followed. Each time the minister presented a solution, until at last the aggressor, his arrogance deflated, agreed to cease hostilities and become an ally. The ruler summoned his minister: "How did you do it?" The minister broke down and confessed. Years before, he said, he had hidden his old mother away, and it was her wisdom that had saved the kingdom. The ruler's heart melted. He saw the error of his ways and resolved from then on to accord the elderly the honor due them.

The tale is Indian. It came to Japan, along with Buddhism, via China in the sixth century. Many Japanese versions evolved. A single thread runs through them: obasute — literally, "throwing grandma away."

The best-known obasute stories concern a mountain in present-day central Nagano Prefecture, 1,252 meters high, known as Obasuteyama — Mount Throwing-Grandma-Away. Here, legend has it, old people in ancient times were carried — some against their will, some in the spirit of a joyful meeting with destiny — and abandoned to starve. There is no evidence anything of the sort actually occurred; no evidence it never did, either. We know this much: Chinese historical chronicles of the third century, recording a diplomatic mission to Japan, noted, "They (the Japanese) are a long-lived race, and persons who have reached 100 are very common."

Obasuteyama today is a famous moon-viewing site, the moon casting beautiful reflections in the terraced rice paddies of the foothills.

Japan is now the most elderly country in the history of the world. Its
average life span, 82 years and soaring, is creating an entirely new kind of society, the vast implications of which, during its embryonic decades, few seemed to think very much about. Now it is upon us. Twenty-three percent of the population is 65 or over, as against a mere 13 percent under 15. Care for the elderly consumes half the national health budget. By 2055, the government predicts, half the population will be pensioners.

Sept. 20 is Respect for the Aged Day. In honor of the occasion — a tale.

It's a familiar story in Japan, and, fittingly, a very old one. It forms a segment of the 10th-century classic known as the "Tales of Ise," an anonymous chronicle, in poetry and prose, of the amorous adventures of a dashing ninth-century courtier named Ariwara no Narihira. And so it came to pass that "a certain lascivious woman thought: 'I wish I could somehow meet a man who would show me affection!' It was, however, impossible for her to express this desire openly."

Of course it was — she was "a year short / Of a centenarian, / Hair disheveled and white." The son in whom she at last confided took pity on her and considered what to do. "Other men are coldhearted — I wish I could bring her together with Captain Narihira."

The captain proved approachable and, indeed, amenable. The episode concludes: "It is a general rule in this world that men love some women but not others. Narihira did not make such distinctions."

Confucius (551-479 B.C.) said: "A youth who does not respect his elders will achieve nothing when he grows up, and he will even try to shirk death when he reaches old age." Was it this teaching that governed Narihira's conduct? Certainly it would have been familiar to him. The Confucian classics arrived in Japan a century or so before Buddhism, and in the eighth century the Empress Koken decreed that every household in Japan should have a copy of the "Classic of Filial Piety."

For vigorous and beautiful youth to obey, revere and humble itself before infirm, doddering age does not come easily. It is a discipline one must strive to acquire. The Heian Period (794-1185) was a flighty time, however, and Confucianism by then, though destined for a revival centuries later, had come to seem stuffy and old-fashioned.

The court lady Sei Shonagon in her "Pillow Book" (circa 1000) tells of a young palace official who, ashamed of his ugly old parents, tossed them into the sea. This is beyond obasute; this is outright murder. But Sei seems more amused than appalled. She says nothing about punishment. The man in fact proceeded to honor his deceased parents at the Bon festival of the dead. A contemporary monk wrote a mildly disapproving poem: "A man who has pushed his parents into the ocean's depths / Now
celebrates the festival of Bon — / Alas, what a grievous sight!" The commentators speak of a mischievous pun that suggests a smile on the poet's face — "Bon," the festival, and "bon," the splash as the old people hit the water.

Early in the Edo Period (1603-1867), under a stern Tokugawa Shogunate that valued obedience above all else, Confucianism became a veritable state religion.