

Japan's longevity cause for pride, concern



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Kamato Hongo of Kagoshima, Japan, recorded as the world's oldest woman, is shown on Sept. 9, six days before her 116th birthday. Holding a birthday certificate is her daughter, Shizue Kurauchi, right.

World's oldest woman, 116, dies

Island also home to nation's oldest man ever, 120

By Mari Yamaguchi
ASSOCIATED PRESS

TOKYO — Kamato Hongo, a Japanese woman believed to have been the world's oldest person, died yesterday. She was 116.

Born in 1887, Hongo was recognized as the world's oldest person by the Guinness Book of Records after American Maude Farris-Luse died in March at the age of 115.

Hongo's doctor, Kiyoshige Niina, said she died of pneumonia.

Hongo was famous across Japan for her habit of sleeping for two days, then staying awake for two days.

She was hospitalized Oct. 8 in Kagoshima, on the southern island of Kyushu, after complaining of loss of appetite and fever. She appeared to have been recovering when her condition worsened yesterday, Niina told a news conference.

Raised on a small rural island on Japan's southern fringe, Hongo grew up tending cows and farming potatoes.

The same island produced the Japanese record-holder for longevity, a man, Shigechiyo Izumi, who died in 1986 at the age of 120.

Hongo symbolized the graying of Japan's society

— a trend that elicits both pride and concern. Until last month, the world's oldest documented man was also Japanese, 114-year-old Yukichi Chuganji. He died Sept. 29.

Japan has the world's longest life expectancy: 85.23 years for women and 78.32 for men in 2002. The average age of the population is steadily rising.

Experts say the traditional Japanese diet, low in fatty foods, helps explain the long life span.

An annual government survey released this year in conjunction with Respect for the Aged Day, a national holiday, showed a record 24.3 million Japanese — nearly one in five — have reached age 65.

At the same time, Japan marked a record low 1.32 births per woman last year, a figure that has been falling for the past three decades and reflects changing values that have led more women to choose careers instead.

The changing demographic has raised fears the nation's pension and health-care systems will be badly strained in the years ahead by a population consisting of fewer people of working and tax-paying age.

Following Hongo's death, the title of world's oldest person went to Mitoyo Kawate, a 114-year-old woman from western Hiroshima born May 15, 1889, the London-based Guinness World Records said yesterday.