International Journal of Arts and Humanities: ISSN-2360-7998 (Print) and Open Access: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23208906
Abbreviated Key Title: Int. J. Arts Humanit.
ISSN: 2360-7998 (Print) and Open Access
Volume-14 (Issue): 9, August, Pp. 288-292, 2026

Full Length Paper

Foreignness, Ageing, and Road-Safety Discourse: An Exploratory Comparative Analysis of Japanese Media Framing of Foreign and Elderly Drivers

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Abstract

This paper compares Japanese media treatment of the May 2025 Shin-Meishin Expressway wrong-way-driving incident involving a Peruvian man with four 2025 accidents involving drivers aged 81–91. It examines incident severity, investigative visibility, publicly reported legal consequences, and framing. The foreign-driver case generated a long narrative arc—arrest, indictment, courtroom reporting, prosecutorial sentencing request, and debate over foreign-license conversion. In contrast, the elderly-driver reports generally emphasized the crash, the driver's age, and broader prevention or mobility concerns; most did not provide a publicly traceable final legal disposition. The comparison therefore suggests an asymmetry in follow-up and scale: nationality was repeatedly linked to individual culpability and punishment, while old age was more often linked to population-level risk management. Because the sample is small and assembled from search-visible reports, these findings describe selected coverage rather than Japanese media as a whole.

Keywords: Japan; elderly drivers; foreign drivers; traffic accidents; media framing; criminal justice.

Accepted: 31/8/2026 **Published: 30/9/2026**

1. INTRODUCTION

Traffic-accident reporting does more than describe collisions. Headlines and follow-up stories select identity markers, allocate responsibility, and determine whether an event appears to be an isolated offense or evidence of a wider social problem. In Japanese reporting, both nationality and advanced age can become salient labels. The analytical question is not simply whether those labels appear, but what narrative work they perform.

This paper asks three questions: How did investigations unfold in the selected cases? What punishments or other legal consequences were publicly reported? How did media coverage frame the driver and the wider policy problem? The comparison centers on the Shin-Meishin case and four serious or fatal incidents involving elderly drivers during 2025.

2. MATERIALS AND METHOD

The unit of analysis is the publicly accessible news report or follow-up report. The sample includes CBC/TBS, Mainichi Shimbun, Bengo4.com, Television You Yamagata/TBS News DIG, and Toyo Keizai coverage, supplemented by the National Police Agency's 2025 traffic statistics page. Reports were coded for (1) identity markers in titles or leads; (2) investigative actions, including arrest and referral; (3) adjudicative actions, including charge, trial, sentencing request, and sentence; and (4) systemic framing, including licensing, license surrender, mobility, and generalized risk.

Legal categories are kept distinct. Arrest is an investigative measure, not punishment. A prosecutorial request is not a sentence. Where searches located no later disposition, the table states "not publicly located";

this finding does not establish that no later action occurred.

3. Incident Summaries

Incident	Driver and location	Human consequences	Reported sequence
Shin-Meishin wrong-way driving 18 May 2025	Peruvian man, 34 at arrest; Shin-Meishin Expressway near Kameyama, Mie	Early reports: four injured; later indictment: six injured; no reported deaths	After drinking and prolonged driving, the car struck a barrier and faced the wrong direction. The driver continued more than 10 km against traffic, passed about 132 vehicles, contributed to multi-vehicle collisions, left, and presented himself the next day.
Nagano store collision 17 June 2025	91-year-old man; Nagano City	84-year-old wife, a passenger, died	The vehicle struck the exterior wall of a store while leaving or moving within the parking area.
Kashima agricultural-road collision 19 June 2025	81-year-old man; Kashima, Saga	77-year-old wife was critically injured and later reported dead	The driver’s light truck struck his wife on a road between agricultural fields and greenhouses.
Sagae pedestrian collision 17 July 2025	90-year-old man; Sagae, Yamagata	94-year-old pedestrian died	The vehicle struck a pedestrian crossing the road. The victim was initially able to speak but later died.
Yonezawa two-car collision 5 August 2025	Drivers aged 87 and 81; Yonezawa, Yamagata	One person seriously injured	Two vehicles collided; initial reporting said police were investigating the circumstances.

Table 1 note: Injury totals in the Shin-Meishin case changed as the case progressed; the later indictment figure is used for legal comparison. Sources: [1]–[8].

4. Comparative Findings

Case	Investigation and adjudication reported	Publicly confirmed punishment/status	Dominant media framing
Shin-Meishin	Arrested for failure to report; referred to prosecutors; later charged with dangerous driving causing injury, drunk driving, and failure to report. Defendant admitted the charged facts at trial; prosecution requested three years' imprisonment.	Arrest and prosecution confirmed. A three-year term was requested, but the sources used here do not establish the final sentence.	Nationality appeared repeatedly. Coverage emphasized flight, drinking, intent, danger, courtroom evidence, culpability, and foreign-license conversion.
Nagano	Police investigation reported; no arrest or later court process located in the selected sources.	No final legal or administrative disposition publicly located.	Age and fatal consequence foregrounded; coverage was brief and incident-centered.
Kashima	Police investigation reported; no arrest or later court process located in the selected sources.	No final legal or administrative disposition publicly located.	Age, family relationship, and rural/agricultural setting foregrounded; later commentary connected the case to license-return debates.
Sagae	Driver arrested initially on suspicion of negligent driving causing injury; the pedestrian later died.	Arrest confirmed; no later charge, sentence, or license disposition publicly located.	Age of both driver and victim was central. Follow-up focused more on elderly-driver policy than courtroom accountability.
Yonezawa	Police investigation reported; no arrest or later court process located in the selected sources.	No final legal or administrative disposition publicly located.	Ages of both drivers and serious injury were prominent; little publicly traceable legal follow-up.

Table 2 note. "Not publicly located" means that the reviewed, search-visible sources did not establish the disposition; it is not evidence that authorities took no action.

Sources: [1]–[8].

4.1 Investigative visibility

The Shin-Meishin investigation became a continuing public story. Initial reporting described the wrong-way journey, collisions, flight, surrender, and arrest. Later reports added license history, alleged drinking, reconstructed vehicle movements, dashcam evidence, indictment, and courtroom testimony. This cumulative coverage converted a traffic event into a detailed criminal narrative.

The elderly-driver cases were generally visible at the incident stage but not at the disposition stage. The Sagae driver's arrest was reported, but a subsequent charge or sentence was not located. The other reports primarily stated that police were investigating. This difference may reflect case complexity, editorial interest, source availability, or later outcomes; it cannot be attributed to identity alone.

4.2 Punishment and legal consequences

Only the Shin-Meishin case in this sample has a publicly documented path through indictment and trial. Prosecutors requested three years' imprisonment after the defendant admitted the charged conduct. That request should not be represented as the final punishment. The reviewed sources did not establish the October 2025 judgment.

For the elderly-driver cases, the absence of reported sentences prevents a direct quantitative comparison of punishment severity. It does, however, permit a comparison of punishment visibility. Readers were shown the penal process in the foreign-driver case, whereas they

were often left at the police-investigation stage in the elderly-driver cases.

4.3 Media framing

Both nationality and age operated as headline-level identity markers. Their associated frames differed. In the Shin-Meishin coverage, “Peruvian” was repeatedly attached to allegations of drinking, escape, dangerous conduct, arrest, prosecution, and punishment. Some stories expanded the incident into criticism of the foreign-license conversion system, even though later court reporting identified drinking, fatigue, collision with a barrier, fear of police detection, and the decision to continue as immediate circumstances.

The elderly driver reports more often moving from individual incidents to generalized questions about advanced age, voluntary license surrender, physical or cognitive decline, transport access, and prevention. This approach can be less overtly criminalizing, but it still risks treating age as a sufficient explanation. An elderly driver’s involvement does not by itself prove that age-related impairment caused the crash.

5. DISCUSSION

The central contrast is between individual criminalization and social-risk management. The foreign-driver case was narrated through a dense chain of culpability: drinking, dangerous driving, collision, flight, arrest, confession, and requested imprisonment. The elderly-driver cases were more frequently incorporated into a domestic governance problem: how an aging society should balance road safety, independence, rural mobility, family responsibility, and licensing controls.

Severity alone does not explain the difference. The selected elderly-driver incidents included deaths and critical injury, while the Shin-Meishin case caused injuries but no reported fatalities. Nevertheless, the latter received more visible reporting about prosecution and punishment. This situation supports a cautious inference that news value was produced not only by harm but also by the combination of wrong-way driving, alleged flight, alcohol, dramatic dashcam footage, and foreign identity.

The comparison should not imply that elderly drivers were treated leniently by law. Public reporting is an incomplete proxy for legal processing. Nor should it imply that all Japanese outlets used the same frame. It shows that, within this sample, the media made the foreign defendant’s penal trajectory much more legible than those of the elderly drivers.

6. LIMITATIONS

The study is an exploratory, non-random sample. Search-engine visibility changes over time; local reports may be archived, removed, paywalled, or poorly indexed. Several reports summarize other outlets, and syndicated versions may repeat the same underlying reporting. The cases differ in offense type, evidentiary record, investigative stage, and victim relationship. Finally, a located disposition must be coded as punishment.

7. CONCLUSION

The selected 2025 incidents reveal a marked difference in the public visibility of accountability. The Shin-Meishin case received sustained coverage from accident through trial, making investigation and potential punishment central to its meaning. Elderly-driver cases causing death or serious injury were generally reported as serious events but received less search-visible coverage of prosecution or sentencing. Their broader media meaning was more often policy-oriented, focusing on licensing, aging, and prevention. The result is an asymmetrical narrative: foreign identity becomes closely associated with individual wrongdoing and penal consequence, while elderly identity becomes associated with a population to be managed. A larger study using matched dates, deduplicated articles, multiple search terms, and court-record verification would be required to determine how general this pattern is.

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