Suye Mura, A Japanese Village.

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BOOK REVIEWS


Modern Japan may be termed a controlled experiment in social change. The aristocracy of brains that piloted the Meiji Era consciously attempted to control the forces released from within by the abolition of feudalism and from without by the introduction of technology. They had at their disposal a highly centralized government and a docile and responsible people, but even they were unable to overcome the lag of country behind city, or to prevent the uncontrolled and unintended changes caused in the village by the substitution of money for rice as a medium of exchange and by the encroachment of machinery on human hands and feet.

Such facts as these are thrown into sharp relief by the fascinating study of a Japanese village made by Professor Embree. Sociologists will find here the first scientific “synoptic picture of life in a rural Japanese community,” as Professor A. R. Radcliffe-Brown calls it; and anthropologists will recognize in it a worthy companion to the path-finding study of Tepoztlan, a Mexican Village, by Robert Redfield. No one, however, should open Suye Mura with the expectation of being swept along as one might be on first reading Lafcadio Hearn’s Japanese sketches. It is a scientific work and necessarily includes some tedious details. But Dr. Embree has succeeded in scattering a sufficient number of stepping-stones of picturesque material to carry the semi-scientific reader across the rough spots.

Chief emphasis in this review will be placed on discovering in Suye Mura the major forces that are impelling social change in rural Japan today, and on pointing out the differing rates of change in rural and urban communities. But before doing so it will be pertinent to consider whether Suye Village (“Mura” means Village), was wisely chosen for “an integrated social study of a peasant village in rural Japan,” and to glance at the scope and arrangement of the materials.

Economically, Suye is representative of the bulk of Japanese villages, for it is primarily devoted to rice-growing and secondarily to silkworms. It is neither rich nor poor, nor is it one of the “model” villages in which the pace of change has been forced by Government stimulus. Environ-
mentally, Suye is almost too far removed from the main currents of the nation's life, for it is located in a "dead-end valley surrounded by mountains," in a backward section of the southern Island of Kyushu, near a branch railway line. Its remoteness from any military zone reduced the suspicion of the military police respecting the motives of the American investigator and his wife. Fortunately, the study was made a year before the outbreak of the conflict in China, with its accompanying fear of foreign espionage in Japan. Finally, Suye is small enough—1663 persons in 285 households—to be studied intensively by two persons within a year.

Suye thus qualifies as a fair representative of a great many Japanese villages, but obviously not of them all. Its very remoteness from commercial and industrial centers disqualifies it from representing the thousands of villages within sound of the factory whistle and railway locomotive. Suye was certainly a good type of village to begin with, for in it the complicating factors were reduced to a minimum, and its folkways stand near the baseline of feudal Japan, from which all communities have advanced in varying degrees. It is to be hoped that similar studies will be made of other types of villages, and also of cities. Japanese economists and sociologists have made many studies of villages, but most of them have confined their attention to the economic aspect, and none of them has looked at village life whole, as Dr. Embree here does.

Dr. Embree's study is one of a series which are being prosecuted by the Department of Anthropology of the University of Chicago. The anthropological techniques which were so long reserved to primitive tribes are here applied to civilized communities. This trend was apparently begun a dozen years ago by the Lynds' *Middletown*, which Clark Wissler, in his introduction, called a pioneer study in "contemporary anthropology." Being an anthropological inquiry, one would expect to find the materials in *Suye Mura* arranged functionally, that is, in accordance with the activities the people carry on. *Middletown* adopted this approach, and classified the entire life of the people under six heads, such as "Making a Living." Failure to adopt consistently such a scheme of classification in *Suye Mura* accounts for the slight overlapping between the chapter on "Village Organization" and the one on "Forms of Cooperation." A scheme of classification for a community which differs from, but is fully as logical as, that used in *Middletown*, is to be found in Kulp's *Country Life in South China* (New York, 1925), which antedated *Middletown* and was probably the first competent study
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of its kind. The presentation in Suye Mura, however, has its merits. For example, the cross-sectional chapter on "The Life-History of the Individual" is an original and illuminating way of giving the Western reader an insight into some of the main events that mark the life of the typical Japanese peasant. The concluding chapter, "Changes Observable in the Social Organization of Suye Mura," is a penetrating summary of the entire study.

The obstacles to be surmounted by outside investigators in gaining a true understanding of the life of any community are formidable, especially when the investigators are occidentals probing into an unsophisticated oriental village. Dr. and Mrs. Embree achieved noteworthy success in reducing these obstacles; Dr. Embree was able to see life as it is, without praise or blame. Mrs. Embree had a fluent command of spoken Japanese. A sympathetic Japanese interpreter ably supplemented them both. All three lived in the village itself through a round of four seasons and participated freely in the social occasions of the villagers.

We now turn to the main theme of this paper: a comparison of the extent and rates of change in rural and urban Japan, as illustrated on the one hand by Suye, and on the other by Matsuyama, a city of about 81,000 inhabitants. The data for the comparison come from the observations of life in Matsuyama made by the writer at about the time when the Embrees were in Suye.

Two of the sharpest contrasts between life in Suye and in Matsuyama are the role of the seasons, and the degree of cooperation between neighboring families in economic and social affairs. In the village, the round of the seasons creates the rhythm of life which enfolds every person and every activity. Sowing, tilling, reaping; cold, mildness, heat; slack, moderate, and busy seasons; these dictate the succession of religious festivals, the round of social courtesies, the favored time for weddings, for house-building and bridge-repairing. The 30 pages in Suye Mura given to "The Yearly Festival Calendar" show what an elaborate and rigid framework for life is based on the seasons and the lunar calendar. In Matsuyama, on the other hand, the solar calendar predominates, and the merchants, officials and professional people who make up the bulk of the population are more affected by the stock market and the commercial calendar than they are by the round of the crops and the phases of the moon. The only point at which Matsuyama shares the rhythm of life in a prominent way with the peasants is in the observation of the chief religious festivals, but in the city even these occasions have tended to be exploited as occasions to draw crowds and boom trade.

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The predominance of cooperation in the village and its paucity in the city is equally noticeable. In old Japan, even in the cities, the small groups composed of neighboring household heads, known as kumi, were at once an effective means of social control and a basis of economic cooperation. Today only faint vestiges of the kumi are to be found in the cities, but in Suye and other villages they persist in connection with irrigation, bridge-building and a few other tasks. But the modes of group cooperation that still remain are being undermined by omnipresent technology, as in the use of cement instead of boughs for bridges, and for the foundations of buildings, and the substitution of machinery for hands in rope-making and threshing. For larger undertakings, such as road-making and the emergencies due to flood and fire, one or more persons from each household are deputed to join the work crews, and shirking is effectively penalized by withdrawal of the benefits of group cooperation from the offender. The outstanding form of cooperative labor is the transplanting of rice-seedlings and other vegetables, when the back-breaking labor is relieved by the chanting of familiar ditties and the exchange of friendly gossip. In the city, the public bath-house often functions as a gossip-exchange, but it does not compare in intimacy with the cooperative bathing plan followed by many of the farmers in Suye, whereby several neighboring housewives will heat their bath water in rotation on successive evenings, and first the men and then the women and children, will together enjoy a hot scrub and friendly chat.

In both village and city the modern cooperative society has partially filled the gap which the shrinkage of the old cooperative groups has left. In Suye, the Agricultural Cooperative Association includes practically all the farmers and covers buying, marketing, credit, and miscellaneous functions. It is affiliated with the National Federation of Cooperatives and enjoys the strong support of the national Government. In Matsuyama, the cooperative societies included, in 1935, some 16,000 members, who would represent the large majority of the households in the city, but they play a much less important part in the total life of the city than does the Cooperative Association in villages like Suye. For the most part, city dwellers in Japan are coming to live almost as atomistic an existence as people do in occidental cities. The chief unifier common to both Suye and Matsuyama is supplied by the religious and patriotic festivals.

One unique characteristic of the small cooperative groups in the villages is the absence of a long-term foreman or chairman: each member becomes foreman in turn. This fosters a democratic equality and ac-
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cords with the long-standing tendency in Japan to avoid individual responsibility. In the cities, the demands of modern business have tended to favor individual initiative and assumption of responsibility.

The plodding peasant in a village like Suye lives in a much larger world than did his grandfather, but in a much smaller world than does the resident of Matsuyama. To some of the boys in both communities comes the summons to compulsory military service. This means that one-third of the boys in Suye, and presumably, a slightly smaller proportion in Matsuyama, have their horizons widened by spending two years at some large center, or perhaps on the mainland of Asia. Few of the inhabitants of Suye, apart from those drafted for military service, ever go farther from home than the county seat, whereas it is not uncommon for the men and women of Matsuyama families to journey to Osaka, or to go on a pilgrimage, half piety, half recreation, to some distant chain of temples.

Yet the centripetal pull of political centralization and patriotic nationalism operates powerfully on both village and city. There is a tendency for the hamlets not only to lose their self-governing cooperative agencies, but also to be absorbed into the village administration, and for the village, in turn, to be controlled more closely by the county and prefectural offices, and the prefectures by the central Government. One result of this tendency is well expressed by Dr. Embree: "The substitution of central governmental control for feudal control has resulted in a great emphasis on nationalism. Whereas, formerly neither the farmer nor the government was ever much worried about such an abstraction as patriotism so long as the farmer produced his rice, today, as a powerful tool of social control, nationalism is stressed in education, in conscription, in public talks in the school auditorium, and in the encouragement of societies such as the Women's Patriotic Society."

One of the most potent forces drawing Suye into the current of national and even world affairs has been the gradual substitution of a money economy for the centuries-old rice economy. Matsuyama has been moving in the orbit of money ever since feudalism gave way to modernism. But in Suye, even yet, the traditional value of rice in the local economy is evidenced by the fact that it is the only thing in the house that is regularly locked up. Formerly, artisans were all paid in rice, as were the samurai in olden times by their daimyō. Nowadays, all but a few of the artisans, like the blacksmith and the blood-letting horse-doctor, are paid in money. The farmers used to make their own tools and clothing and household equipment, but they are becoming increasingly

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dependent on factory products, which must be paid for with money. To get money, they must sell rice on the national market, and silk on the world market. Thus the fateful chain of mechanization and interdependence grows constantly stronger, and the village is drawn irresistibly into the orbit of the metropolis. As a cash crop, silk is especially important, and since raw silk is largely sold in America, Suye is bound for better or worse to the ups and downs of American economy.

The gradual extension of the money economy into Suye will wean it away from the lunar calendar, but so long as the village remains agricultural, its cycle of life will revolve around the seasons rather than the counting house. The village shopkeepers, however, deal almost entirely in money transactions, and they therefore have no need of the exchanges of labor and the other forms of group cooperation which still figure so prominently in the life of the farmers. A disturbing by-product of this fact, already alluded to in another connection, is that the shopkeepers are well-nigh immune to the means of social control which holds the farmers in leash, namely, refusal of cooperation by their neighbors in such critical junctures as seed-transplanting and irrigation, when such ostracism may ruin a year’s crop.

If one were to ask almost any resident of Matsuyama whether or not he would like to change his home to Suye, he would probably reply, “Decidedly not.” Among his chief reasons would be the loss of most of the cultural advantages of the city, not to mention the exchange of pen and abacus for plow and hoe. Certainly Suye would suffer in a cultural comparison with Matsuyama, even though one happened to be a lover of nature and could command sufficient leisure from farm drudgery to enjoy the beauties of the open air. Suye has only an elementary school, no library, no lectures except homilies on patriotic occasions and talks by the itinerant farm adviser; no music but the amateur efforts of ambitious souls learning the simple native instruments; no movies short of the neighboring town or the rare summer show in the village. Matsuyama, on the other hand, has several high schools for boys and for girls, and three institutions of junior college grade; a public library, and an historical society; lectures and literary societies; a chamber of commerce and industry; daily movies and frequent theatrical performances; public story-tellers; and an abundance of music, both Japanese and occidental. Occidental music, in particular, has made astonishing progress during the last two decades.

It is in the aesthetic realm that Suye is most noticeably deficient. The people unquestionably appreciate natural beauty, but they make little
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effort to create beauty. Their houses may be well-proportioned, the thatched roofs picturesque, and the interiors pleasing in their simplicity. Some of the farmers do simple carving or make domestic utensils that have artistic merit, but they do not beautify their homes, or exhibit works of art, even in the niche of honor, the tokonoma. Poems of sorts are written by guests on the occasion of the sending-off of a conscript, but the songs the people sing are rude, if not vulgar or obscene. The chief beauty created by man is in the temples and the venerable groves around them; but temples are also found in Matsuyama, scores of them. Matsuyama boasts an annual exhibition of arts and crafts, and many of its homes are graced by paintings and carvings which would be prized by connoisseurs. But the city's chief claim to aesthetic fame is that it is the capital of the seventeen syllable poem known as hokku or haiku. The number of hokku "fans" is indicated by the fact that there are no less than four periodicals devoted to these poems, issued by individuals or societies in Matsuyama.

The people of villages like Suye, far more than the city dwellers, find emotional outlet in the year-round succession of religious and patriotic festivals, and in the simple rituals of the manifold forms of social intercourse. The peasants, young and old, throw themselves with abandon into the artless acting and dancing that provide ecstatic release from the humdrum routine of their workaday life. It is not to be wondered at that at the festival of the harvest moon, when shochu (a form of cheap rice liquor) is liberally mixed with hilarious dances, there should be a tendency for sexual inhibitions to be dangerously relaxed. On the other hand, Suye has no geisha or bawdy houses such as abound in Matsuyama and its hot-springs suburb Dogo.

The reader cannot fail to be impressed by the number of feasts held in the village and by the copious consumption of shochu, whether at marriages, farewells to conscripts, the blood-letting of domestic animals, or even at funerals. Apparently every one in Suye drinks shochu, although obstreperous drunkenness seems to be rare. This universality of drinking is in contrast with the four representative villages studied by Ikeda, (Ikeda Yoshinaga: Noson Shakaigaku Kenkyu, Sociological Studies of Agricultural Villages. Tokyo, 1938). Grading these villages from A up to D, in accordance with the area of the land tilled per household, he found that in village A, out of 10 households, four were steady drinkers and only one abstained. But in village B the number of abstainers was eight out of 42; in village C, six out of 20; and in village D, three out of 11. In other words, the poorest village shows the lowest percentage of
abstinence. No figures are available as to the proportion of users of intoxicating liquors in Matsuyama, but it has an active temperance organization, and it may be assumed that the several hundred Christian or near-Christian families are abstainers.

Meagre as is the cultural life of Suye, it is gradually being enriched, at least so far as its intellectual content is concerned. Illiteracy has been reduced to the vanishing point, although probably less than one house in 20 could boast any books. A daily paper is read by one in 10 households, and 60 of the 285 households subscribe to the national Agricultural Cooperative Association's magazine, *Light of the Home*. Although it may safely be assumed that the number of readers is slowly growing, yet Suye's low rank in the cultural scale among the villages of the Empire is shown by the findings of Ikeda's study. It shows that the newspaper subscribers numbered three out of 10 in type A village, 27 out of 42 in type B, 13 out of 20 in type C, and 11 out of 11 in type D; even A, the poorest village, rating three times as high as Suye. As to radios, in Suye there are only two, one of them being owned by the broker, the other by the school; whereas radios are owned by three out of 10 in type A, by 22 out of 42 in type B, by 12 out of 20 in type C, and by nine out of 11 in type D.

Let us now examine what effect modern influences have had on social stratification in our two communities. In old Japan, a village like Suye would have had only two classes: the peasants, who were practically serfs, and the samurai, who were the officials and soldiers. In a castle town like Matsuyama there were four classes: the samurai, headed by the daimyo, the farmers, artisans, and merchants. With the abolition of feudalism in the early seventies, only two classes were left in the Empire: the aristocracy and the people at large. There has, however, been a new stratification growing up, based partly on wealth, and partly on education and position. In Suye, the only sharp line of demarcation is that between the farmers and non-farmers—the merchants, officials and teachers. Among the farmers themselves are gradations based on wealth or on length of residence and family prestige. The shopkeepers, having come in from other communities, and belonging to a group which formerly ranked at the bottom of the social scale, stand decidedly below the professional and official group. In Matsuyama, in the absence of the farmers, artisans fill to some degree the place filled by the farmers in the village. Then there is a new class of industrialists and substantial business men, who are coming to occupy a position of respectability comparable to that held by the samurai of old. Furthermore, in Mat-
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suyama there is a much higher proportion of professional men than in Suye, and they supply most of the leadership for the numerous voluntary organizations in the city. The constant tendency toward social inequality is partially neutralized by the equalitarian influence of the public school, the army and navy, and the ballot box; but all of them together seem impotent to overcome entirely the differential of wealth, whether in city or country. In Suye, an interesting social grouping which cuts across all ordinary social lines is the Donenhai, or One-Age Club. There may be as many such clubs as there are congenial groups of former schoolmates who happen to be of the same age. They are generally composed of men. The farmers of Suye say that as they grow old a Donen brother becomes closer than a wife.

Religion has for ages played a large part in the life of the Japanese, even more in the country than in the city. Certainly its hold on the people of Suye shows no signs of sharply waning. The grosser superstitions, such as dependence on the prayers and charms of the kitoshi, the self-appointed healing and praying priests, seem to have been little affected by the diffusion of literacy and physical science. The local shrines and temples are not all well kept up, but in the homes the god-shelf and the Buddhist memorial tablets are faithfully preserved and worshipped, at least by the elders. The younger generation seem to stand in fear of evil spirits and of the penalties which defiance of the traditional religious forms might bring, but are content to leave the regular religious observances to their parents. Christianity has never penetrated to Suye, whereas it has gained a firm foothold in Matsuyama, and its influence there can be traced in both the ethical and religious standards of the community. In Matsuyama, also, higher education has emancipated considerable numbers of the people from superstition and from blind adherence to the traditional faiths.

The tenacity of superstition, however, even in so enlightened a city as Matsuyama, was impressed on the writer when he was told that the following incident occurred only a few years ago. A new route for a section of the local electric tramway necessitated the removal of a large tree in which the spirit of a badger was popularly believed to live. For a while it looked as though no workmen could be found willing to defy the spirit by felling the tree. Finally, a Christian foreman assembled a gang of Korean laborers who had no objection to doing the job, the foreman himself hoping thereby to end the superstition. The tree was felled, and to the amazement of the populace, the workmen suffered no harm. Then some clever person circulated the rumor that the spirit

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of the badger had punished the city by deserting it and taking refuge in a certain tree in a village some miles distant, and that worshippers who repaired to it would receive a special blessing. Forthwith the crowds from far and near who resorted to the tree became so large that the railways and steamship companies had to run special excursions. This continued for eighteen months, so that the total number of worshippers is said to have exceeded half a million.

Both Matsuyama and Suye illustrate the gift of the Japanese people for avoiding precipitate and destructive social changes. Except for the brief period of adolescent contempt for their ancient heritage which marred the eighteen eighties, they have woven the new strands deftly and smoothly into the old fabric. In Suye Mura Dr. Embree has succeeded in giving the Western world a cameo of this process. That he has done it well will already have become plain; but only an infatuated admirer would fail to discern minor errors and a few omissions of desirable material. Among the points that have been either omitted entirely or too lightly touched upon may be mentioned health, vital statistics, marital data, age distribution, filial piety, intra-village and inter-village friction, the family council and conciliation, and social pathology, such as gambling, theft, and crimes of passion. Dr. Embree secured data on several of these items, but omitted them in deference to the publisher’s insistence on brevity. The appendices contain interesting supplementary economic data, and also verbatim translations of the somewhat naive speeches delivered to the villagers by officials and priests; but one wishes there might have been added a short glossary of unusual Japanese terms, with their ideographs.

The data for both Suye and Matsuyama were gathered before the outbreak of the “China Incident,” with its profound effects upon Japanese life. It would be most interesting if competent observers could discover just what changes have taken place in both places, under the economic and psychological pressures of wartime. Among the most marked changes that would appear, it is safe to assume, would be the trend toward centralized control of every phase of life. Japan may still allow a greater degree of freedom of opinion, movement, and enterprise than do some of the totalitarian states, but during the last three years, it has moved far in that direction.

Galen M. Fisher
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