

Kurusu

The Price of Progress in a
Japanese Village
1951-1975

Robert J. Smith



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Japanese Village, 1951-1975

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Foreword

“LIFE IN KURUSU, while it exhibits many traditional features, shows also evidence of striking change”—thus Professor Smith, twenty years ago, judiciously concluding the monograph in which he presented one of the most vivid and perceptive of the accounts of Japanese villages in the early fifties. The changes he had in mind were the effects, slowly emerging over half a century, of public education, increased cash cropping, improved transport, greater mobility: households had become much less self-sufficient; extended family ties had diminished in importance; still-remembered customs had been abandoned. “Striking” changes, yes, but not so definitive that their irreversibility did not have to be argued. “It seems virtually certain” was as far as he would go, for instance, in arguing that Shinto and Buddhism would probably not regain their prewar stature as vital religions in Kurusu.

The changes which he records in his present study of Kurusu revisited are of an altogether different order of magnitude. Most of the hamlet’s twenty-odd households still count as “farm households” and still have an average of a little over an acre each, divided into a dozen tiny fields; but some have three or four thousand dollars’ worth of equipment to work their holding with, and at the same time farming has chiefly become a matter for old men—who give the impression of “puttering about” at it. The younger generation have gone, or commute to jobs elsewhere. The old live longer, more comfortably, but in greater danger of loneliness. Where once possession of a bicycle was a matter of some pride, many families now have two cars. Thatch has long since disappeared; houses have been rebuilt; color television has

long since outshone the gilt and jollity of village festivals. In a quarter of a century the boom has carried the people of Kurusu into *and beyond* consumerism. They are now worried about pollution; their schoolchildren are trained to the simple skills and the simple pleasure of sharpening a pencil with a knife, taught to conserve fossil fuels by eschewing the electric sharpener which had become standard classroom equipment.

The fifties were a time when the Kurusu Youth Club earnestly studied a new middle school text on Democracy. The change of which people spoke was sweeping change in laws, institutions, and ideas; hardly at all in farming techniques or the material conditions of life, which changed only slowly. After twenty years it is the material changes which stand out and of which Professor Smith's informants speak most readily. Sometimes they speak despairingly of wholesale change in social relations too—"the young nowadays have *no conception* of filial piety." But the reality is more graduated and subtle.

How much so Professor Smith documents clearly, vividly, and also with feeling, providing a well-rounded account of a not untypical Japanese village which should appeal to a variety of readers. Professional ethnographers can savor the precision and conscientiousness with which he records, for instance, just what the offerings were and who was present at a roof-raising ceremony. Students of social change can find the evolving structures of economic activity or household composition charted in quantified detail. And the ordinary reader can find a sensitive account of a human community by someone who is not afraid to judge, and whose criteria of judgment reflect a warm concern with the quality of human relationships and the same humane ambivalence about material progress that most of us share. The qualities of his writing reflect the nature of his relations with the people of Kurusu. We lose something, perhaps, from his self-denying resolve not to quote any gossip passed on to him by one Kurusu resident about another. But we learn as much as we do about Kurusu residents precisely because the *relationship of trust and understanding* which Professor Smith and his wife established with them necessarily entailed such scruples.

Studies of "my village twenty years later" usually carry a faint air of disappointment. Few mature anthropologists can recapture the ex-

citement of their first experience of fieldwork—or prevent themselves from half expecting to be able to do so. One gets occasional glimpses of such disappointment in the present book, but Professor Smith avoids projecting them into an easy romantic nostalgia for the snows of yesteryear. There is no elegy for the loss of quaint simplicities, of the colorful customs and the simpler, purer pleasures of the Kurusu of 1951. He is offended, to be sure, by the spoliation of the Inland Sea, but he is equally offended by those who deny the real increase in popular welfare which that spoliation has brought, particularly the middle-class urban zero-growthers in whose praise of lost simplicities and scorn of vulgar mass-produced pleasures he rightly discerns a certain snobbish contempt for farmers who have got above their proper station. He approves of the greater freedom of the young; at the same time he does not conceal his distaste for the insensitively selfish way that freedom is sometimes used.

Where he does give way to nostalgia, perhaps, is in his saddened discussion of the way Kurusu as a community “came unstuck” in vehement dispute over the rights and wrongs of inviting a broiler fowl enterprise to build its factory in the village. An affair of this kind points up the difficulty of community studies. It is not only that Kurusu is enmeshed in the national economy and polity. Kurusu culture is at once a part of a national Japanese culture, a local version of it, and influenced by it. The cohesive Kurusu of the early fifties still reflected a prewar Japan in which overt protest against authority was outlawed as a manifestation of bad thoughts. Kurusu in the seventies was part of a nation in which the role of the protestor—what Professor Smith refers to at one point as “the new style of open and angry verbal confrontation”—had been accepted and institutionalized (even, as a Marcuse would say, by repressive tolerance contained). Without this availability of the protestor role, and without the national press concern with environmental pollution, one can be sure that his Clover affair would never have attained the proportions that it did. Professor Smith tells us of the posters, the demonstrations, the stone-throwing. No doubt there were also barricades, armbands, sweatbands tied tightly around foreheads—the whole protest idiom.

But conflict on television between cohorts of police and students is one thing; a similar style and intensity of conflict within face-to-face

communities like Kurusu is quite another, and it is not too difficult to understand why, as Professor Smith suggests, the people of Kurusu should feel "ashamed" at having let things go so far. But the fact is that they did *and* managed to patch things up again. The new generation of Kurusu residents, one could argue, are not only less "involved" in their community by virtue of their more widely ramifying ties outside the village but also, by some definitions of maturity, more mature. Their repertoire of personal relations no longer consists of the all-or-nothing alternatives of living in each other's laps in total harmony or violently "speaking bitterness." They can, as Americans say, "handle" conflict. Which is, I suppose, a good augury for Japanese society as a whole.

At least it is a good augury as long as people continue to *care* about maintaining friendly relations with their fellow men as well as with putting on their sweatbands to stand up for their rights or for justice. Veblen wrote some sixty years ago about "Japan's opportunity." He meant an opportunity to carve out an empire. Industrialization was gradually increasing Japan's potential strength in military hardware. It was also inexorably breeding individualism and gradually sapping the feudal cohesiveness which was a precondition for invincible military fanaticism. The 1920's, he thought, would see the point of optimum trade-off between the two trends.

Perhaps the present represents an opportunity in another sense. The Japanese economy is capable of delivering an increasing level of material affluence. The trends to selfishness and egotistical self-assertion which Professor Smith discerns in some of the younger generation have still not quite eroded a widespread and responsible concern for community (and for the weaker members of the community) either in Kurusu or in the macro-community of the nation. Perhaps this is the point of optimum trade-off between the rising trend of prosperity and the declining trend of community. Japan now has acquired the material means, and still retains the will, to establish and entrench the institutions of a humane and caring society which ensures a decent quality of life for all its citizens. We shall look forward to having Professor Smith chart its progress in that direction with another, equally sensitive and perceptive look at Kurusu in twenty years' time.

R. P. DORE

Preface

MY FIRST period of research in Kurusu in 1951–52 was supported by a grant from the Social Science Research Council. I went to Japan, then still under Allied occupation, as an associate of the Center for Japanese Studies of the University of Michigan. Many people were very kind to me, but I must acknowledge a special debt to the late Robert B. Hall, Sr., and to John W. Hall, now of Yale University. My return trip to Kurusu in 1975 was made possible through the generosity of Cornell University.

Many people have commented on earlier versions of the manuscript. For their patient and exemplary criticisms I wish particularly to thank Harumi Befu, L. Keith Brown, John B. Cornell, R. P. Dore, and Davydd J. Greenwood. Renée Pierce wrestled mightily with the draft and emerged triumphant with an impeccably typed manuscript. The Stanford University Press has once again provided the kind of help that every author needs. I am especially grateful to J. G. Bell and Peter Kahn, and to my editor Gene Tanke.

The foreigner conducting research in Japan is invariably the recipient of innumerable kindnesses. Among the many people who have been especially helpful to me over the years, I must single out my old friend Satoh Tetsuo, whose assistance in the first study was of inestimable value, and to all members of the Takao family, who have always made me welcome in their home on my visits to Kurusu.

My wife Kazuko was an equal partner in the 1975 restudy, but I have been unable to persuade her to accept coauthorship of this book. Her help and criticism during this project, as in all my undertakings, were indispensable.

A word is in order on some of the conventions adopted in this book. I have given all personal names in Japanese order, with the surname first, and have used the modified Hepburn system for romanizing Japanese words. Unless otherwise noted, all national and prefectural statistics are taken from the *Japan Statistical Yearbook*, published annually by the Bureau of Statistics, Office of the Prime Minister, Government of Japan. To avoid cluttering the text with figures, I have generally given wages, salaries, and costs of goods and services in *yen* alone. For comparative purposes, the reader may note that the exchange rate was fixed at 360 *yen* to one U.S. dollar from 1949 through August 1971, and that for the next six years it held at about 300 to one.

A special note on the matter of weights and measures. All recent Japanese publications have used the metric system, and by 1975 metric measures had almost completely displaced the old Japanese weights and measures that all Kurusu farmers had used in 1951. I have accordingly followed the new usage, except where conversion to acres and square yards serves to emphasize a relationship or draw a contrast for American and British readers. For convenience, the measures used most often in the text are given below:

<i>Japanese</i>	<i>U.S.</i>	<i>Metric</i>
1 <i>tsubo</i>	3.95 square yards	3.31 square meters
1 <i>tan</i>	.245 acre	9.92 ares
1 <i>chō</i> (10 <i>tan</i>)	2.45 acres	.992 hectare
1 <i>gō</i>	.384 pint	.18 liter
1 <i>shō</i>	1.92 quarts	1.8 liters

In 1975 everyone discussed farmland in terms of units of 10 ares rather than *tan*, but because of their similarity (1 *tan* = 9.92 ares) I have used the two measures interchangeably. American readers should bear in mind that both represent about a quarter of an acre. It will be helpful in understanding the scale of things if the reader keeps in mind that the average size of a Japanese farm family's holding is about nine-tenths of one acre (37 ares), whereas the average size of the American farm is about 200 acres. Building size is still expressed in terms of the number of *tsubo* of floor space. The average dwelling in Kurusu is about 20 *tsubo*, or about half the size of a typical American house with a floor area of about 1,500 square feet.

R.J.S.

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Introduction

THIS BOOK is about a place called Kurusu and the people who live there. I first came to know them in 1951 and I last saw them in 1975. Because restudies in anthropology are still uncommon, if no longer rare, I should like to explain how I came to undertake this one, and why I decided to write about Kurusu in the way I have. In telling its story I have perhaps revealed more about their affairs than some of its residents would have wished, yet I know of no other way to communicate the quality of life in a place like this and the transformations it has undergone in the past quarter-century.

The author of a restudy usually begins with a previously published report, either his own or one by another person, to which he adds his newly collected materials. There are several ways to proceed, and the author's choice from among them is ultimately dictated by some combination of his personal preferences, the points he wishes to emphasize, and the nature of his material. (See the Bibliography for a short list of works that exemplify various approaches.) I have decided to write an entirely new book rather than to reissue previously published materials largely because I want to reconsider what I thought I knew about the place in 1951-52 in light of what I have learned about it during my most recent stay there in the summer of 1975.

It is tempting to cast a work such as this in the idiom of self-discovery. I have not found it difficult to resist this temptation, however, for I feel strongly that Kurusu and its people deserve something better than to serve as a mirror in which I may try to glimpse my own reflection. Readers who prefer their community studies straight may wish to skip the section on my personal involvement, although reading

it, I think, will do them no permanent harm. I offer the following remarks because I do not want to obscure the body of the account by setting myself at the center of the narrative, which is not mine, after all, but theirs. Unless he is hopelessly insensitive, anyone who returns to a place he once knew well after nearly a quarter of a century will inevitably discover some things about himself. The question is whether the experience is of such intrinsic interest or value that it need be made central to the analysis of the materials he has collected. I feel strongly that the experience should *not* serve as the framework for a report of this kind. In a day when narcissism has been elevated to the status of an ideology, it is well to reflect on the considerable advantage of distancing one's self from the subject of inquiry.

I have therefore taken some pains to remove myself from most of the action, believing that those who read this book in years to come will not care very much about the interior states of its author. Nevertheless, I am bound to point out that my stance is in some ways a highly partisan one. So that the reader will not have to keep his eye exclusively on me rather than on the people of Kurusu, I will state my bias as clearly as I can. The farmers of Japan, and not the small-holders alone, have been badly dealt with by their government. While they have been treated very well indeed by the standards of Asian countries generally, in comparison to other occupational groups in Japan they have suffered economically, socially, and politically. It was only in 1960, after all, that the gap between the incomes of farmers and blue-collar workers finally all but disappeared.

Moreover, the agricultural population, almost always at the low end of the per-capita income scale, is regularly buffeted by an agricultural policy that is well-meaning but often either incompetent or insensitive. In all fairness, it must be pointed out that the entire blame for the swings of policy cannot be laid to government indecision alone. In the years immediately following the end of World War II, the government encouraged production in a desperate effort to secure enough food for the population of Japan. The farmers bent every effort to raise yields and increase the amount of land under cultivation, and suddenly there was too much rice. The series of bumper crops in the late 1960's led to the adoption of a policy designed to take some land out of rice production altogether. The farmer would be paid not to grow rice—a concept I had discussed with a group of farmers in 1951, at which time

they found it completely incomprehensible. Then came the worldwide shortage of grains, and once again the Japanese farmer was asked to produce more rice. Despite all of these sharp swings from one extreme to another, the response of the farmer has been one of remarkable equanimity. Why should this be so?

The question raises a problem in writing about Japan that bears brief examination here. In the most general sense, it may be said that there are two strongly contrasting views of the character of that society. One holds that Japan is a restrictive and repressive society in which smoldering conflict is kept damped down only by the most odious forms of coercion. Proponents of this view sometimes maintain that dissent and outbreaks of violent opposition to established authority are common occurrences which are glossed over or concealed by the authorities, who are always at pains to foster the illusion that Japan is a harmonious and tranquil state. In this reading of the situation, the lives of working-class persons, including the farmers, are bitter, short, and brutish, and those of their exploiters, though equally brutish, are far more comfortable than they deserve.

The other perspective has it that to an extent rarely encountered in other industrial nations Japan really is a tranquil and harmonious society. These observers point out that not only are the indices of social disorder, such as rates of felonious crime, delinquency, divorce, and so on, remarkably low, but that many of them have remained stable or even declined in the past fifteen to twenty years. By world standards life expectancy for both men and women is very high, and the conveniences of everyday life are now almost universal, in a society where only a few years ago possession of even a radio was a luxury not yet attained by the majority of the population.

I raise this issue because I want to make my own position clear. However relatively deprived they may once have been, the people of Kurusu have never lived in abject misery. They neither fear the police nor commit serious crimes. Their health is generally excellent, and although they work very hard indeed, their lives are neither short nor brutish, and they are not dehumanized by their enthusiastic participation in Japan's consumer revolution. It is a tribute to their resilience and their essential graciousness that despite all the vicissitudes of their lives since the end of World War II they remain generally optimistic, cheerful, and civil. They are by no means paragons of virtue, of course.

There are among them the vain and greedy as well as the modest and generous, the hostile and frustrated as well as the acquiescent and passive. But it is not a cruel place; no one goes in fear of physical violence. The members of all its households can expect that in times of crisis others will rally round to help them out. As we shall see, even when the fabric of community life seems close to coming apart, these people still manage to activate the old hamlet-centered social usages which have for so long bound them together.

Because Kurusu is so small a place, I have kept some of its secrets. Almost all of them are known to virtually everyone in the hamlet, I suspect, but I can see no reason to give them wider currency. I once thought that I should respect confidences at least in part because only the speaker and I shared the knowledge that he was passing on to me. I am now convinced that this assumption was wholly in error. The anthropologist is far less likely to turn up information potentially damaging to his informants than some would have us believe. It is not entirely clear to me why it has been claimed with such urgency that anthropologists are privy to secrets, or that in the normal course of events they come into possession of uniquely threatening information. I strongly suspect that the claim serves largely to compensate for feelings of powerlessness on the part of the anthropologist, and to inflate his relatively unimportant role in the communities where he works.

To give an illustration from my own experience, when I was writing up the materials from my 1951–52 research, I deliberately suppressed all the information I had collected on black-market sales of rice. My reasoning was, I suppose, that in the unlikely event that what I had written were to be read by any person in a position of authority in Japan, he would learn nothing of this illegal activity by Kurusu residents from me. I now realize that the authorities were well aware of the black-market dealings in rice; in fact, they knew a great deal more about them than I could ever have hoped to learn, and for good reason. Grad (1952:33) points out that on paper the amount of land planted in grains, beans, peas, and potatoes actually *declined* by an incredible 595,200 hectares between 1939 and 1946. The reason was not that the farmers were concealing information from the authorities; it was that the local authorities were concealing the actual planted acreages from the central government. Crops from these unreported

fields could be excluded from the stringent national requisition program, thus providing more food for the prefecture's own population and increasing the chances for profiteering by the local authorities themselves. So much for my effort to protect my informants.

Yet there are limits beyond which I do not wish to go. Gossip is a favorite pastime of some people in the community, and although its purveyors and its subjects are about equally aware of this aspect of their relationship, I have chosen not to report here what any resident of Kurusu told me about another. The only exceptions are some of the categorical denunciations made publicly in connection with the Clover affair, which is discussed in detail in Chapter Eight. In order to blur things a bit, therefore, I have taken a few liberties with the placement of dwellings and the directions of roads and paths, as well as with family composition and life histories. None of this information is completely falsified, however, nor does it do such violence to the truth of the matter as to distort the record in any substantive way.

It is not my intention to suggest that Kurusu stands for all of postwar rural Japan (see Ishino 1962 and Norbeck 1961 for two early commentaries on more general postwar changes), nor do I think it profitable to pause long over the question of its representativeness. Kurusu is representative to the extent that there is almost nothing in the record of the past twenty-five years that would seem particularly odd to anyone who knows rural Japan. At the very least, the materials that follow would draw the comment, "Oh, so it's *that* kind of place." Which is to say that its local festivals have been almost completely abandoned (see Suenari 1972 for an account of the decline of ritual between 1962 and 1971 in a community in northeastern Japan); that a high proportion of its adult residents work outside the village; that most of its children now graduate from higher-school; that very little of its paddy-field land has been sold for other uses; that most families have at least one automobile, a color television set, and many other household electrical appliances; and that as its population has declined the number of separate family residences has increased. Agriculture has become less and less important as a source of family income, and every year it accounts for a smaller fraction of the total. Nonetheless, few families have given it up altogether, and it is one of the wonders of the present that most of them have kept on farming. The agricultural