

- An interesting and highly informative paper on the status of the salaried man in Japan and the effects on the social changes taking place in that country.

THE SALARIED MAN IN JAPAN

There is a species of animal which seems to think alike all over the world, irrespective of an immense diversity in environment. It is called the salaried man.

Since I have occupied various positions in three countries — Japan, Australia and the United States — I believe I have some qualifications for making such a statement. When I was in a bar in Washington or Melbourne, I often thought I was back in Tokyo as my colleagues held forth, at great length, on the boss's lack of brain power. (Strange to say, a boss is an idiot in every country.) And recently, I head a section head in an American office in Tokyo reproaching female secretaries for their irregular attendance and for indulging in idle chatter during working hours. They obeyed his instruction for two weeks, but by the third week they had returned to their former ways. I have often seen Japanese secretaries display the

same tactics: when a thunderstorm comes, don't move, keep quiet for a while, and let it pass. Salaried people of any race have the same instinct. The most important topic of office conversation everywhere is promotion or demotion.

There are differences, however, between salaried people in Japan and those in other countries. They spring mainly from a different historical and social background. First comes their relation with their employer. Japanese salaried people usually stay at one company for their entire working life. In Japan it is still thought to be a vice to change one's employer, although the concept is now rapidly changing, because of the post-war economic and social revolution.

When I was with the Central Bank of Japan, then regarded as one of the most conservative organizations in the country, my colleagues

used to tell me with a tone of self-pity that the bank was like a lukewarm bath: if one stayed in it, one would never feel comfortable, but if one dared to emerge from it a cold would surely ensue! This is the wisdom of life challenged and proved by the sad experiences of many daring Japanese. In fact, if a Japanese moves to another company, he will lose, first of all, seniority. He may get a higher salary, but his intangible prestige and status at the second company will be seriously handicapped, because he is a newcomer. He must wait several years, or indefinitely in most cases, before he is treated on the same footing as colleagues with a greater length of service.

It is still a basic practice in most Japanese offices for salary, promotion, retirement allowance and various fringe benefits to be determined by length of service. This discourages mobility of labour and inevitably strengthens the sense of dependence on the employer. Many Japanese salaried people live in company-owned houses or flats at a nominal rent. (In big cities where the hous-

ing shortage is acute, and rent is exorbitant, this is a great benefit.) All or part of their fares to and from work is paid by the company. They can make purchases at a discount at a company store. The company serves luncheon in its dining room, and provides free sporting or recreation facilities. Flower arrangement, calligraphy, foreign languages and other arts are taught by company-paid teachers. Once or twice a year, the staff members of a department or a section enjoy a week-end sight-seeing trip, staying at a club-house owned by the company or at an inn specially reserved by it. Senior offices play golf at clubs where the company has corporate membership and dine with customers at luxurious restaurants where the bill is picked up by the company. When a young man and woman marry, he or she will ask a boss of the company to act in a nominal capacity as a marriage go-between. (The role is very similar to that of godfather in a Western country.)

When a Japanese man reaches retirement age, usually fifty-five, the company, if

it has an affiliated company, will find him a job in it where he can stay for several years, though on a lower salary, until replaced by somebody else from the parent company. Thus, the life of Japanese salaried people cannot be separated from the company, and this explains why human relations in a Japanese office are very subtle and intricate. "Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil" is an accepted philosophy.

On the other hand, competition, the struggle for power, is severe, as the arena is confined. Personal ties form the most effective weapons. Factions exist in perhaps every company in Japan: graduates from the same university, people from the same district and so on. When I was a youthful officer in one company, I once visited a senior officer at his home on a personal matter; some months later, I found to my great surprise that his opponents suspected me of belonging to his faction merely because of that one personal visit. Japanese salaried people spend a great part of their lives in this sort of office at-

mosphere.

When, however, they leave their ultra-modern offices for the sanctuary of their homes they encounter something different. The Japanese family, once the citadel of the traditional system, is now quickly changing its character. A family consisting of grandparents, parents and five or six children is no longer prevalent, and an average family is now composed of parents and one or two children. The birth rate in Japan fell from the highest level to the lowest in the world during one decade after the war, a change which reflects the growth of individualism.

Accompanying the simplification of the family structure, the status of women, particularly of wives and younger females, has been greatly enhanced. Now a husband, tormented by the office atmosphere during the day, has to contend at home with female and younger members of his family who have absorbed all kinds of free, democratic thinking through television, radio, newspapers, magazines, films or school lectures. Ironically

enough, the products of mass media which are churned out by big companies reflect nothing of the medieval atmosphere in which they are produced.

A father can no longer hope to dominate his family as in the old days. Nowadays many husbands and fathers have to work in the kitchen or tend a washing machine at week-ends or take the family out to amusement centres. If they try to tell the family that they have to rest to build up energy for their jobs, they will be talked down very promptly. In fact, Japanese husbands and fathers themselves are changing their way of thinking. A sample survey conducted among 2,300 male workers in Tokyo in 1961 showed that 57 per cent considered that enjoying life was more important than occupation.. When questioned about their objective in life, 61 per cent chose the happiness of the family, 23 per cent individual pleasure, 7 per cent the wish to make a contribution to society, 6 per cent wealth, and only 1 per cent fame.

This emphasis on pleasure and happiness especially of

the family, has undoubtedly become more pronounced in the past six years. Before the war, the happiness of the family meant maintaining the order of seniority at home — the prestige of parents, and children loyalty to their parents — but it now means enjoyment of life by the whole family.

Post-war economic prosperity has greatly improved the living standards of Japanese salaried people. In 1965, 90.3 per cent of the non-agrarian families owned a television set, 62.4 per cent a refrigerator, 72.7 per cent an electric washer, and 41.4 per cent a vacuum cleaner. The rate of car ownership is also rising, and the English word "leisure" is being naturalized, though it is pronounced *rehjar*.

Material progress is thus re-modelling the family life of Japanese salaried people, who now spend their time at home in almost the same way as their Western counterparts. They like to watch television. They like to grow flowers in a small garden. They like to chat with friends on harmless subjects. They like to read about

disasters or conflicts (somewhere else) in newspapers. They like to take the family to holiday resorts from time to time.

And yet it is true that Japanese salaried people live under two sets of different principles: a quasi family system at the office and an individualistic life at home. They are, as it were, amphibious animals living on land and in water at the same time.

But it would be a mistake to think that they can move from one type of life to another without difficulty or pain. There is an undeniable contradiction and it tells on their nerve, even if not all of them are aware of it. You will find a tremendous district of Tokyo and other number of small bars in every Japanese cities and may wonder how so many bars can survive. They thrive because it is here that large herds of amphibious animals congregate nightly to ease their mental tension and enjoy a brief escape from the contradiction in their lives.

Since the quasi-family system at the office tends to frustrate a Japanese salaried

man's legitimate ambition, he tends to turn to his family, and derives increasing satisfaction from pursuing individualistic and materialistic pleasure at home. In the long run, however, it is unthinkable that the quasi-family office system can be sustained indefinitely.

Recently, I talked with a few top-level businessmen about the future prospects of the Japanese economy. There was a striking unanimity of opinion among them. They were all worried whether Japan would be able to maintain its present economic progress when individualism expanded among workers. They said: "When the present generation of diligent and obedient workers is replaced by younger individualists, we just don't know what will happen."

But one thing is clear. Japanese salaried people will, sooner or later, be completely domesticised in the Western way, and it will be very difficult to distinguish them from their counterparts in the rest of the world. — *By Sen Matsuda in the Hemisphere, July 1967 issue.*