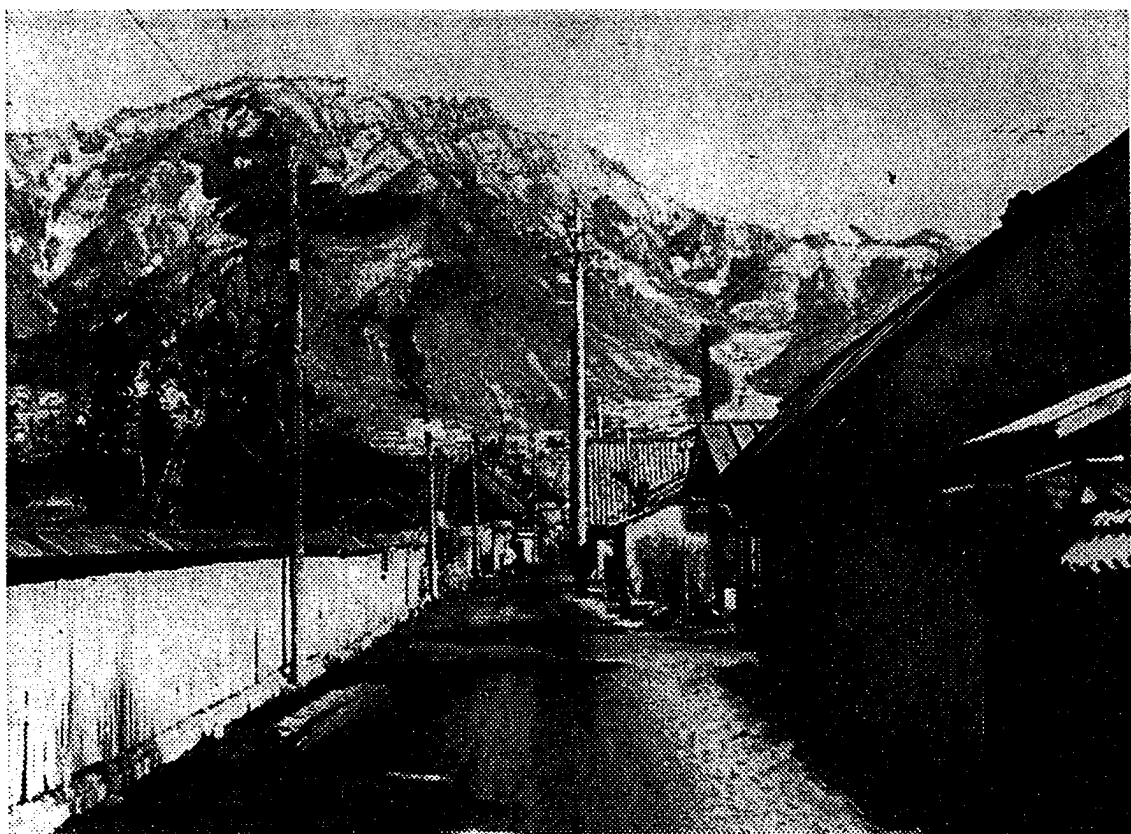


Japan's Sects Grow Amid Quake Peril

By EMERSON CHAPIN Special to The New York Times
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The New York Times (by Emerson Chapin)

EARTHQUAKE-PERILED: Matsushiro, Japan, has felt thousands of quakes recently, and many of its residents are being pressed to accept membership in "new religions."

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By EMERSON CHAPIN
Special to The New York Times

MATSUSHIRO, Japan Jan. 21 — Officials of this earthquake-periled town in central Japan are disturbed by the influx of representatives of some of Japan's aggressive "new religions." They accuse them of having tried to exploit the fears of nervous residents.

Most conspicuous among the outsiders who have shown up here recently are members of Soka Gakkai, the energetic Buddhist organization that now claims more than 15 million members throughout Japan and its year-old political party, Komei-to.

A Soka Gakkai delegation from Tokyo hounded the conservative 73-year-old Mayor, Kenjiro Nakamura, for more than five hours in his office this week, seeking to persuade him that its faith held the solution to the town's problems and his own worries. Though local officials are wary in discussing the matter, it is believed that about 50 households in this town of 22,000 have been won over to Soka Gakkai membership since the start of the earth tremors that have shaken Matsushiro for five and a half months.

Events here since last summer have created fertile ground for proselytizing among a lit-

erate but unsophisticated and superstitious rural populace. A total of almost 100,000 quakes have been recorded by sensitive instruments. In one day last November, 22 were strong enough to be felt by humans.

The sharp shock of even a moderate-scale quake, with an epicenter believed to be only two miles below the surface, and the accompanying explosive subterranean noises, repeated many times a day, can produce frightening effects.

Strange lights sometimes illuminate the nocturnal sky over the rugged mountains that circle the sprawling town. These are somehow connected with the quake phenomena but in a way that Dr. Mineo Takehana, head of the Matsushiro Seismological Observatory, says is beyond the present grasp of man's knowledge.

"The "new religions," in many cases sects of established faiths that have suddenly struck a popular chord, took root in the disturbed Japanese society after World War II. They now put their total membership at one out of five Japanese.

The most sensational growth was achieved by Soka Gakkai—the Value-Creation Society—whose extensive and affluent organization seeks to help its members attain both material and spiritual well-being. But

several other new Buddhist and Shinto groups also have followers numbered in the millions.

Matsushiro residents have been warned by earthquake experts to be prepared for shocks of moderate force that could cause considerable damage. Emergency provisions have been stored and evacuation drills have been staged. But officials say safety precautions are hampered by the assertions of religious groups that belief and faith can end the quake danger.

Soka Gakkai officials retort that town authorities fear exposure of their inefficiency and resent energetic and effective moves by the Buddhist organization. They say it is customary for Soka Gakkai and Komei-to to send delegates at once to any disaster-stricken or threatened area to assess practical needs, prod politicians into action and allay spiritual uneasiness.

Soon after the start of the unexplained tremors a fundamentalist Shinto group explained that the deities of a shrine atop nearby Mount Minakami were offended by the installation of the scientific apparatus of the Government's Matsushiro Seismological Observatory in a 10-mile network of tunnels running deep beneath the mountains.