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Suematsu Kenchō, 1855-1920: Statesman, Bureaucrat, Diplomat, Journalist, Poet and Scholar

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Suematsu Kenchō

SUEMATSU KENCHŌ has been described as a 'second-ranker' in the Meiji era,¹ and indeed his name is not well-known in Japan nowadays. This is partly because the front-ranking Meiji leaders were ten or twenty years his senior, partly because of his humble (non-samurai) background, and because he was born outside the four 'Restoration fiefs' of Satsuma, Chōshū, Tosa and Hizen.² Baron Suematsu also died relatively young, aged sixty-five, and suffered ill health including high blood pressure.³ Nevertheless, he headed the second tier, received recognition and patronage from the Meiji *genrō* (elder statesmen), and made prolific and significant contributions in many areas which deserve to be remembered today.

EARLY LIFE IN JAPAN

Suematsu Kenchō was born on 30 September 1855 (20 August in the second year of Ansei by the old calendar) in the hamlet of Maeda, then

part of Miyako-gun in Buzen, and still now a farming village on a fertile plain within the city of Yukuhashi, Fukuoka prefecture. His father Suematsu Shichiuemon was an important village headman (*daishōya*), and his mother's name was Nobuko. When he was a child, he was first called Senmatsu then Kenichirō and eventually settled on Kenchō, which for a while he thought should be read as Norizumi.⁴

Kenchō was the fourth son. From the age of ten in August 1865 he was sent to the nearby private school (*juku*) of the renowned scholar and poet Murakami Bussan (1810-79) called the *Suisaien* (founded in 1835) where he studied Chinese classics (*kangaku*). In 1866 the pro-shogunate Kokura clan's territory was attacked by the Chōshū army, and the Suematsu family home was burnt to the ground. Kenchō was sent to relatives in neighbouring Tagawa-gun, from where Murakami brought him back to *Suisaien*.⁵

In 1871, there being little future at home, Suematsu Kenchō went up to Tokyo at the age of seventeen. He was taken in as a house boy by the high government official Sasaki Takayuki (1830-1910) of Tosa, and while there he met and became a friend of Takahashi Korekiyo (1854-1936), the future president of the Bank of Japan, finance minister and briefly prime minister. Takahashi taught Suematsu English in exchange for lessons on the Chinese classics.

In May 1872 Suematsu was enrolled at the *Tōkyō Shihan Gakkō* (Tokyo Normal School) but soon left on Takahashi's advice because his progress in English was so rapid. This caused a rift with the Sasaki household, recorded in Takahashi's autobiography.⁶ Then Suematsu and Takahashi tried selling English translations of foreign newspapers and magazines to make a living, and eventually the Nippōsha bought them.

In 1874 Suematsu joined the Nippōsha company. The chief editor, novelist and dramatist Fukuchi Gen'ichirō (1841-1906) soon recognized Suematsu's journalistic talent and added him to the editorial staff of the *Tōkyō Nichinichi Shimbun* founded that year. Apart from his real name Suematsu also used the pen name of Sasanami Hyōji. In January 1876 he was appointed a commissioner in the Central Office of the Council of State (*Seiin goyō kakari*) and accompanied the envoys Kuroda Kiyotaka (1840-1900) and Inoue Kaoru (1835-1915) to Korea after a Japanese surveying ship the *Unyō* had been fired on. There he helped in drafting the unequal Treaty of Kanghwa of 26 February 1876.

Suematsu's newspaper articles criticizing the Meiji leaders (*genrōin-hihan*) and calling for the abolition of the Ministry of Educational Affairs (*Kyōmushō-haishiron*) attracted the attention of the great Chōshū men Itō Hirobumi (1841-1909) and General Yamagata Aritomo (1838-1922) on whose staff he served as an adjutant during the Satsuma Rebellion of 1877.⁷ Another article comparing rickshawmen to oxen and calling for their early replacement by trains and horses (*jinnikisha-bōkokuron*) caught

the eye of educationalist Matsumoto Mannen (1815-80).

IN ENGLAND 1878-86

Having already entered the world of officialdom with his trip to Korea, on 29 January 1878 Suematsu was ordered to go to England to be apprentice first secretary at the Japanese Legation in London, with an additional order from the Office of Historiography (*Shūshikan*) on 9 February to research English and French historical methods in his spare time.⁸ It was probably at the recommendation of Itō Hirobumi that he was chosen from many candidates. Suematsu left Yokohama by ship on 10 February. Sailing via the Suez canal (completed in 1869) he reached Marseilles on 26 March, and travelled overland to Calais, arriving in London's Victoria station at 6 p.m. on 1 April 1878. He soon obtained lodgings in a well-to-do English household, giving details in letters to his family.⁹ He also told them about London theatre visits, an audience with Queen Victoria and the first visit of a Japanese warship to Britain in July 1878, the sloop *Seiki* built at Yokosuka.

Much more of the next eight years is revealed in the long letters written by Suematsu to his powerful patron Itō.¹⁰ Still in his mid-twenties, Suematsu was apparently more interested in foreign travel and the chance to study in Britain than in a serious diplomatic career, and it has been suggested that he was sent to Britain by Itō partly as his informant on the political situation in Britain and Europe.¹¹ Indeed, Suematsu had no particular duties at the legation, which was small and not busy.

The surviving letters to Itō cover mainly the years 1878-79 and 1881-82. The first one from England is dated 24 April 1878. It begins with the Balkan conflict and the British government's budget, and moves on to report on the Japanese envoy Ueno Kagenori (1844-88) who had been



In the garden of the Japanese legation in Notting Hill, London, between April 1878 and June 1879. Suematsu is on the far right in the back row. Ueno Kagenori (Minister in London, 1874-79) is in the centre of the front row.¹²

criticized for spending too much and not reporting back to Japan often enough. Suematsu defends Ueno and concludes that he should not be replaced, though in fact he was recalled in 1879 and succeeded by Mori Arinori.¹³

In a letter dated 10 June 1879 Suematsu wrote of his hope to enter Cambridge University in the spring of 1880, but he did not do so until the following year. In 1879 Suematsu switched from training to be first secretary to the lower rank of third secretary, and was eventually discharged from the diplomatic service at his request – and presumably with Itō's blessing – in December 1880.

Suematsu matriculated at Cambridge as a non-collegiate student in October 1881. A letter of introduction by an M.A. of the university was necessary to do this, and the brilliant student Kikuchi Dairoku (1855-1917) was the only qualified Japanese at the time. When working as a journalist, Suematsu had previously got to know Kikuchi's younger brother, the zoologist Mitsukuri Kakichi (1857-1909) and arranged for him to send letters from America – the first ever letters from a foreign correspondent to a Japanese newspaper – so it was probably this connection which was used.

In those days there was no special exemption for Asian students from Latin or Greek in the Cambridge preliminary examination (called 'Little Go', and also including Mathematics) and in a letter to Itō dated 12 May 1882¹⁴ Suematsu confessed that he found both languages very difficult and was briefly in despair, for unlike Kikuchi Dairoku who had been schooled in England (at University College School) he had never studied classics. But in June 1882 he managed to pass the examination with a second class. In the following June he passed the second part of the exam in geometry and algebra with the same result.

Suematsu was admitted to St John's College, the college of his *senpai* Kikuchi, as a pensioner in October 1883. He financed his studies partly through a loan of £300 from the London branch of Mitsui & Co. sanctioned by Itō, and partly through tutoring his fellow-student Maeda Toshitake, for which he received £16 per month, which was enough to cover his food and clothing. Suematsu sat the law tripos exam in May 1884 and passed at the head of the third class. For this he was awarded the LL.B. (Bachelor of Laws) degree in December 1884 and also later the LL.M. on payment of a modest fee in 1888. (By a quirk of the Cambridge system he also received a B.A., awarded together with his LL.B.)

Of Suematsu's life as a student we know that he was a regular speaker at the Cambridge Union from October 1882 to June 1884 when he left the university. He also carried a motion in his college debating society 'that Party Government is injurious to the best interests of the State'.¹⁵ Here he must have polished his English and acquired the debating skills which later made him a formidable advocate of the Japanese case in the Russo-

Japanese War. That he had a lively sense of humour is illustrated by an anecdote told to the Japan Society of London on 11 January 1905 by H. J. Edwards, then Dean of Peterhouse, in a lecture entitled 'Japanese Undergraduates at Cambridge University':

On the towing-path, among the rowing-men of his College – who wore the familiar scarlet jackets that have added the word 'blazer' to the English language – Suyematz [*sic*] appeared in a brilliant but unknown uniform. 'What club does that blazer represent?' asked the men of scarlet. The answer came, admirable and ingenious. 'Club? Suyematz Club! I invented it myself!'¹⁶

Edwards added that Suematsu was remembered by contemporaries as 'a man of ready speech and merry mood' with an attractive spark of originality.¹⁷

Suematsu was also engaged in writing while in England. In 1879, *Meiji Teppeki Shū*, a collection of Chinese poems written during the Satsuma Rebellion was published, and then his first attempt in English, *The Identity of the Great Conqueror Genghis Khan with the Japanese hero Yoshitsune* (published by W. H. and L. Collingridge, London) dealing with the Japanese legend that Genghis and Yoshitsune were the same person, a theory which fascinated Suematsu though the evidence was inconclusive. This 'historical thesis' was printed at Suematsu's own expense and translated into Japanese. Translations of the English poets Thomas Gray, Byron and Shelley followed.

Suematsu's most famous translation, however, was of part of Murasaki Shikibu's classic novel *Genji Monogatari*. This was the first English translation, predating those by Arthur Waley (6 vols. 1925-32),¹⁸ Edward Seidensticker (1978)¹⁹ and Royall Tyler (2002). It was published by Trübner of London in 1882 as *Genji Monogatari, the most celebrated of the classical Japanese Romances*, and is still available today in paperback (Tuttle, 2000), a testimony to its enduring value and readability. Suematsu in his introduction to the 1900 annotated edition describes the 'Romance of Genji' as a 'national treasure', and Lady Murasaki as 'one of the most talented women that Japan has ever produced'. He nevertheless felt that the thread of the story was 'diffuse and somewhat disjointed', and that the work was 'too voluminous': hence he reproduced only the first seventeen of fifty-four chapters.

On 23 April 1881 Suematsu gave a lecture in a London hotel to the Liberal Society entitled 'The Policy of the Japanese Government'. He did not hesitate to criticize the government's financial policies, or to touch on the thorny issue of treaty revision, then the top priority of Japanese diplomacy, both in his lecture and in his letters to Itō. Presciently he expressed concern about the formation of the *Kempei* ('military police') in

that year, and the state (polity) being thus put in 'a state of siege'.²⁰ The talk was, however, not popular with his compatriots and Tomita Tetsunosuke, a former fellow-member of the legation wrote warning Suematsu that he was endangering his career prospects.²¹ In a letter to Itō dated 13 September 1882 Suematsu mentions advice from Mori Arinori that he was too rash and outspoken, and that he had better abandon hopes of a political career and become a historian, which dismayed him.²²

After graduating in June 1884 Suematsu stayed in England for almost a further two years. Between September 1884 and February 1885 an essay 'On Poetry and Music' (*Kagaku-ron*) appeared in several issues of the *Tōkyō Nichinichi Shimbun*. It was written in a private capacity, criticized officials for failing to take any interest in Japanese poetry and argued that it had suffered for almost a thousand years from 'a debilitating and well-nigh fatal loss of musical qualities'.²³ Suematsu was thus a pioneer in campaigning for reform of Japanese poetry in the Meiji period.

In any event, it is clear that Suematsu's first period in England was excellent preparation, not only for his subsequent career in Japan, but also for his time in England as Japan's special emissary to the Court of St James's, 1904-05. It gave him not only a chance to acquire Western knowledge, but also 'a new awareness of being Japanese'.²⁴

IN JAPAN, 1886-1903

In March 1886 Suematsu was appointed councillor (*sanjikan*) at the Ministry of Education and returned to Japan. In April he was transferred to the Ministry of the Interior, and in March 1887 he was promoted to Head of the Prefectural Government Bureau (*kenjikyokuchō*). At this time Itō was Prime Minister for the first time and Yamagata was Minister of the Interior. One of Suematsu's first achievements in this role was to approach Shibusawa Eiichi (1840-1931) on behalf of a local consortium regarding finance for the construction of the port of Moji as a vital staging post between Nagasaki and Tokyo. The Moji Port Construction Co. was founded in 1889²⁵ and the port was completed in 1897.

On his return Suematsu also began to campaign for improvements in Japanese drama based chiefly on the London theatre.²⁶ He led the Drama Reform Movement and founded the *Enggekikairyō-kai* (Theatre Reform Society) to eliminate obscene and indecent practices, and to cause the virtual abandonment of kabuki drama. 'Traditional theatre buildings and stage design, together with traditional types of play, dramatic literary styles, production methods, and acting techniques were to be replaced . . . by an uncompromisingly Western form of drama.'²⁷ Suematsu's iconoclastic approach to kabuki, which he regarded as shallow and showy,²⁸ attracted opposition from dramatists Tsubouchi Shōyō (1859-1935), Mori Ōgai (1862-1922) and Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901).

The main members of the Theatre Reform Society were Fukuchi Gen'ichirō (who had campaigned for theatre reform in his newspaper²⁹) and the drama critic Yoda Gakkai (1833-1909); the politicians Itō Hirobumi, Inoue Kaoru and Mori Arinori; the businessman Shibusawa Eiichi; and the actors Morita Kanya the 12th (1846-97) and Ichikawa Danjūrō the 9th (1838-1903). But in 1887 the reform campaign petered out, partly a victim of association with the unsuccessful 'Rokumeikan diplomacy' pursued by Itō and Inoue.³⁰ The main positive outcome was a new theatre building for Western drama, the Imperial Theatre (*Teikoku Gekijō*), which eventually opened in Marunouchi, Tokyo in 1911.

On 7 June 1888 Suematsu was among the first in Japan to be awarded a doctorate in literature³¹ for his translation of *Genji Monogatari*. On 22 April 1889 he married Itō's second (adopted) daughter Ikuko. He was thirty-five; she was just twenty-two. To the criticism that a former member of the Kokura clan had married into the 'enemy' Chōshū clan, Suematsu responded with his customary wit that he had 'taken a hostage'.³² After the wedding the couple went together from Tokyo to Yamaguchi which was reported in the *Tōkyō Nichinichi Shimbun* of 3 May as the first ever Japanese honeymoon. They had two children.

In Japan's first general election in 1890 Suematsu was elected to the House of Representatives from his native Buzen, Kyushu. He resigned from the Interior Ministry, when the Diet opened in November, and continued as a member of the House until 1894. He gave an interesting talk of uncertain date on the 1890 election, based on statistical tables he had compiled from the census of 31 December 1888 and his personal impressions gathered during the campaign. He was surprisingly critical of the *genrō* who had been in power since the Restoration, many of whom were his mentors and later colleagues, writing with severity: 'As it is the custom of the world to tire of old faces, they had naturally incurred both the jealousy and hatred of certain groups of citizens.'³³ Despite this Suematsu was made a baron in 1895 and an imperial appointee to the House of Peers (*Kizokuin*) the following year.

In 1898 Suematsu was appointed Minister of Communications in Itō's third Cabinet (January-June 1898). He also began work on the compilation of the *Bō-Chō Kaiten Shi*, an important source for the history of the *bakumatsu* and Meiji Restoration centred on the Mōri family and the old Chōshū provinces of Suō (*Bōshū*) and Nagato (*Chōshū*). Suematsu was the editor-in-chief, recommended to Inoue Kaoru by Itō, with a staff of about twelve and he wrote the general preface for the first edition (1911) and the revised edition (1920).

In 1900 Suematsu was given the important post of Minister of the Interior in Itō's fourth and last Cabinet (1900-01). He also became a member of the standing committee of the *Seiyūkai*, the party formed that year by Itō, and proscribed the nascent Socialist party. When asked why

he had done this he replied that Japan must suppress the troublesome party just as other countries were doing.³⁴ In the same year he was appointed to the Imperial Household Ministry.

SENT TO ENGLAND 1904-6

During the Russo-Japanese War Suematsu was – partly on his own recommendation³⁵ – sent to England to influence European opinion, combat the Kaiser's mischievous 'Yellow Peril' doctrine and plead Japan's case,³⁶ as Harvard-educated Kaneko Kentarō (1853-1942) was sent to America. It was, as he wrote to Itō on 9 February 1904, a mission with 'quite a few extremely delicate points.'³⁷

Suematsu left Japan on 10 February, two days after war broke out, with a letter of introduction in English from Itō to Lord Lansdowne, the British Foreign Secretary. This spoke of Suematsu's revisiting England for health reasons and described 'Russia's highhanded march towards hegemony' as a 'serious menace' to the safety of weaker states.³⁸ Suematsu travelled via Washington where he met President Theodore Roosevelt, who sympathized with Japan and detested the Russians.³⁹

In 1905 two books by Suematsu appeared: *The Risen Sun* (the title was suggested by the British publisher Archibald Constable & Co.) and *A Fantasy of Far Japan or Summer Dream Dialogues*. The former is the more important, being mainly a collection of actual speeches and essays from this period in three parts. The latter is a series of imaginary dialogues about Japan – mostly in the salons of rich and beautiful Parisian ladies – which Suematsu claimed were based on actual conversations held in the summer of 1905. In the preface to *Fantasy* he apologizes for the polemic tone and states:

In publishing this volume I am not in the least degree actuated by a desire to exalt my country unduly, – still less to boast about her achievements. My sole aim has been to show Japan as she is. . .'

In the preface to *Risen Sun* written at Queen Anne's Mansions, Westminster in August 1905 Suematsu acknowledges six benefactors: Murakami Bussan; Dr Thomas Waraker⁴⁰ who taught him English, Roman and international law at Cambridge; Mr Ernest Schuster who taught him German law; and the three Chōshū elder statesmen Itō, Inoue and Yamagata who had 'entrusted me with many important tasks, political or otherwise'.

The postscript, added in Paris on 1 September 1905 just before the Treaty of Portsmouth (New Hampshire) was signed, claims that 'Japan has shown a great moral heroism in the cause of humanity and civilization' and that she 'has maintained her ambition of deserving the name of a

civilized nation'. No longer, Suematsu continued, could Japan be 'looked down upon by many as a petty, infantile, imitative, shallow, bellicose and aggressive nation'. Japan had emphatically confirmed her joining the comity of nations and now aspired to Great Power status!

The first part of the book ('Antecedent to the War') contains a searing indictment of the 'Machiavellian' Russian diplomacy, 1895-1905, which Suematsu claims provoked the conflict. Suematsu quotes official British and Japanese sources in detail, beginning with the Russian-originated text⁴¹ of the notorious Russo-Franco-German Triple Intervention of 1895, couched in terms of 'sincere friendship' and advising Japan to 'renounce the definitive possession of the Liao-tung' peninsula which Russia coveted. (Only three years later Russia obtained a lease of the ice-free Port Arthur and Dalny in the peninsula after Germany obtained a lease of Kiaochow in 1897.)

In July 1900 Russia submitted notes to the Powers, including Japan, in which she stated certain 'fundamental principles' designed to preserve China and prevent partition, but she was the very Power that did most to frustrate them by occupying Manchuria and its treaty port of Newchwang, and seizing the British-owned Peking-Newchwang railway. Later Russia did all she could to delay her withdrawal from Northeast China, with prevarication and demands that no other power should replace her. Russian policy and action is characterized with extreme frankness by Suematsu as devious, reckless, high-handed, cynical, even cloven-hoofed!

Russian armies were guilty of 'barbarity' and massacres of Chinese civilians, e.g. on the south bank of the river Amur opposite Blagoveshchensk in July 1900. (Japanese soldiers at Port Arthur in November 1894 had matched their cruelty,⁴² though Suematsu's account begins after the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-95.) Suematsu also robustly if controversially defended Japan against the accusation of a surprise attack against Russia based on 'nineteenth century precedents, that a formal declaration is not needed to constitute a state of war'. Indeed, there was no prior declaration of war by either side.⁴³

The second part of the book ('A Nation in Training') deals with such topics as the training of soldiers, education of women, *hara-kiri*, ethics, religions and Emperor Meiji's 'determined' but 'amiable' character.⁴⁴ On the Japanese character Suematsu says astutely that there is no shame in being a nation of imitators because civilization is 'only an accumulation of imitation'. What would Europe be without Greek culture, Roman law and the Judaeo-Christian tradition? Some of his views now seem outdated, e.g. his refusal to accept that parents could ever be cruel to their children in Japan (p.141).

The third part ('External Relations') includes a lengthy historical paper on China which he describes as essentially pacific, her 'conquests' and

growth being due to the influence of her culture. Suematsu also defends the Japanese treatment of Russian prisoners-of-war at Matsuyama (Shikoku) as gentlemanly, based on Buddhism and *Bushido*,⁴⁵ and in accordance with the Geneva and Hague conventions. He expresses confidence that in the future his *bête noire*, the discredited Yellow Peril paranoia as manifested in the Triple Intervention, will be dismissed as a 'passing fantasy', whether in economic or military guise. (Perhaps fortunately he did not live long enough to witness the rise of Japanese militarism in the 1930s.)

IN JAPAN, 1906-20

Suematsu returned to Japan in time to attend a 'luncheon' (formal lunch) on 16 March 1906 of the Cambridge and Oxford Society of Japan (the *Kengyūkai*)⁴⁶ at which he sat next to Lord Redesdale (A. B. Mitford) who described him in his *Garter Mission to Japan* (Macmillan, 1906) as 'brilliant' and 'famous all over Europe' after his lectures, letters to *The Times* and other publications.

Suematsu was made a Privy Councillor (*Sūmitsuin-komonkan*) in the same year and was also in time to see Itō before his departure to become Resident-General in Korea. In 1907 he became tutor to the newly-installed Korean crown prince (Yi Eun), a member of the Imperial Academy and a viscount. When Itō was assassinated by An Chung-gun at Harbin station on 26 October 1909, Suematsu published several eulogies of his father-in-law.

From 1912 to 1920 he was in semi-retirement, though he continued to be active as a Privy Councillor, and to work on the *Bō-Chō Kaiten Shi*, while also translating classical commentaries on Roman law. Suematsu was still politically active when he died at home in Shiba, Tokyo of influenza complicated by chronic pleurisy on 5 October 1920, three days after illness struck during a Privy Council meeting.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Suematsu Kenchō was an intellect of great versatility, ambition and patriotism whose achievements have not been properly recognized simply because of their jack-of-all-trades diversity. He made significant efforts to introduce Japanese culture to a Western audience, and to bring Western drama and literature to Japan.

As an eloquent advocate for Japan in Britain and Europe during the Russo-Japanese War which involved unprecedented manpower and technology in a full-scale East-West confrontation Suematsu was both powerful and persuasive, though assisted by the pre-existing Anglo-Japanese Alliance and his Cambridge connections.⁴⁷

Sometimes his passionate and frank outspokenness invited criticism and

imperilled his political and bureaucratic careers, but he apparently never lost the support of his indulgent patrons. Suematsu's wit, intelligence, sincerity and charm may well have been his saving graces in their eyes.