

Village on the Edge between Mountain and Plain
A Generation in the Life of a Tohoku Village

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Many times people in the village asked me why I chose their village for fieldwork because, as they said, “there is nothing particularly interesting or special about our village.” In fact, I was not looking for a “particularly interesting” but for a common place where I could manage to fit in without causing too many “waves.”¹

When I set out to visit the village the first time just to see what it was and then perhaps make a decision, I had hardly any idea of what I would be getting into. It was, therefore, like a dream, when at that first contact a family agreed right away to offer me lodging for the time of my fieldwork. I tried to catch the dream, but as is usually the case with dreams, once you wake up the reality has hardly any relation to the dream. So it was with the beginning of my fieldwork. When, a few weeks later, I arrived in the village in early fall of 1971 eager to get fieldwork started, I happened to meet on the first day with the head of that family, but he had bad news. He told me that circumstances had changed in such a way that his family could not let me stay with them as promised earlier. It was a rude awakening, but when I now look back on this event and on what had happened afterwards, I am convinced that the beginning marked by a shattered dream was necessary in order to bring me back to the village’s everyday ordinary reality.

The village, Hanayama, covers a large section on the southwestern slopes of Mt Kurikoma. Its territory, mostly covered by the mountain’s forests, is drained by three rivers that have cut narrow valleys into the mountain side. Immediately before they reach the great fertile plain northwest of Sendai two of these rivers water the village’s largest, yet still relatively modest, areas of rice fields at its border. These are also the areas with the village’s two largest settlements. One of them is the administrative and commercial center with the village office (*yakuba* 役場), offices of cooperatives, two schools and the village shrine; the other, smaller in size, houses several shops, a sawmill, and the only temple. The rest of the population lives in small clusters of houses locally called “*buraku*” (部落). Most of these hamlets are lined up along the rivers like the pearls of a rosary (*juzu* 数珠). Although they are not separated from one another by sizeable distances, features of the landscape make it often impossible to see from one

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buraku the houses of the next one.

The sheer size of the village, its physical features, and the locations of the numerous *buraku* convinced me upon my arrival that I needed to choose one of the two main valleys. The choice was made easier because of the historical fact that the two valleys had constituted two independent administrative units each under its own headman *kimoiri* (肝入) at the end of the Edo Period and in the early years of Meiji (Hanayama Sonshi Hensan Iinkai 1978: 312-314). So I opted for the shorter valley, the home of about eleven *buraku*. Fortunately, the house of the family with whom I came to stay in the first weeks was located half way up the valley. From there I could reach the farthest up-river *buraku* in about an hour, but then its last house was still another half hour further into the mountain. From the bus stop at the entrance of the valley it took me more than two hours to reach that house. I always preferred to walk. There was actually no other choice. Even today no bus serves the valley, but at the time my walking had an advantage in that I always met somebody on the road and so had a chance to talk and let myself and my purpose be known. At that time cars were still rare and so were telephones. But one day I learned that just a few days after my arrival, at a time when I was working on documents in the village office, people in that last house knew already that a foreigner had arrived and was working in the village office. It was a clear sign that a yardstick is not the only means to measure distance or closeness. And therefore, that if you cannot see the next *buraku*, or even the next house, from your house or *buraku*, it does not mean that they are distant in the sense of having no relation to you. In fact, in a number of situations I encountered I was taught exactly this. I will present more about this later after having introduced more details about the village, its environment, and the exploitation of that environment by the villagers.

Everyone travelling to the administrative center of Hanayama passes along the shore of a lake embedded in the beautiful scenery of ranges of mountains crowned in the distance by the majestic peak of Mt Kurikoma. It is a man-made lake created by a dam that stops the flow of the village's main river Hasama (迫川). It is a lovely lake but its construction in 1957 robbed the village of about one third of its most fertile rice land and 181 of its households. The dam, therefore, was a serious blow to one of the pillars that support life in Hanayama. There are three main pillars: the mountains with their forests used for afforestation and charcoal burning; the narrow patches of flat land in the valleys exploited for rice cultivation; and the possibilities for salaried work in the village's various offices. In addition there are some areas where the forest was cleared after the war to settle repatriates. These are areas where dry-field crops (wheat and *azuki* 小豆 (small red beans)) are grown and cattle are raised, but they occupy a relatively low position in the consciousness of the villagers.

When I arrived in the village in 1971 it had a population of about 3,000. It also had a Junior High School and an Elementary School with two branch schools in distant

buraku in the up-river mountains. But already by that time a steady loss of population occurred resulting in the closure of the branch schools soon after. Currently the Junior High School is closed and the Elementary School counts a total of only twenty-five pupils in six classes (Personal information 2014). One of the reasons for this situation is the loss of young couples. Most of the High School students frequent schools outside of the village and usually do not return to the village after graduation, but try to go to the cities in order to either pursue higher studies or to find work that is more profitable than what they could find back in the village. This situation is responsible for a drastic loss of young people in the village. Today the village has a population of only 1,640 inhabitants which means a loss of 23.5 per cent since 2005 (Information from the City Branch Office Hanayama 2014). 2005 is the year when all towns and villages of the Kurihara District (*gun* 郡) were merged to become Kurihara City, a city of about 70,000 inhabitants. The merger had the advantage for Hanayama in that it can now share income on taxes with the other communities of the new city. Nevertheless, this did not bring relief for the problems caused by the rapidly progressing aging of its population.

Before the merger each community in the district had its own administrative office, the *yakuba*. In Hanayama this had been the biggest single employer of villagers, but as a consequence of the merger, these offices were downgraded to branches of the main office. For Hanayama this meant that the chance for villagers to be employed at the local village office has practically disappeared, although they may, of course, be employed in one of the city offices. Before the merger the Hanayama *yakuba* employed more than 40 people and practically all of them were recruited from the village. These days the branch office in the village employs nine persons, but only three of them are villagers (Personal information 2014). One result is that this kind of employment has lost much of its former attraction, because even if villagers are employed, they must be prepared to spend most of their time far away from the village with the consequence that they are practically unable to work in a farming household. This somehow relativizes the advantage of this kind of salaried employment because it increases the drain on the work force available to the village's farming households. However, since other sources for cash income are very rare or almost non-existent, the village offers hardly any attraction for younger people and, therefore, continues to lose them. But, the outflow of young people is not the only problem. The lack of inflow, namely the lack of young women willing to marry into a farm household is a similar problem. A solution for this problem has been sought by looking for brides outside of Japan, in East or Southeast Asia, with a rather limited rate of success. The sad consequence is then that a household, even if it had a successor, may still have to face an uncertain future because of the lack of a child (or children) to that successor. The threat of such a situation is very serious because it means that the owners of a house and its property are forced to part with them, although they are a precious resource created by and handed down from the

ancestors to their holders in the present generation.

Compared with the fields of the plain, those of Hanayama were, and still are in most cases, considerably smaller. It is, therefore, not surprising that the farmers needed to look for sources to finance their life other than what their fields yielded in rice or other products. I received a telling demonstration of the reality of this need on the evening of my very first day of fieldwork in one *buraku*.

On returning to the house that had just taken me in the night before, I found one of the *zashiki* (座敷) occupied by a group of men who had been drinking and eating there already for a while. Their faces were red and their conversation very spirited. They invited me, the newcomer, to join in and soon explained that the reason for their party was their imminent departure for Yokohama. There they would work until their return to the village in late spring, just in time for the transplanting season, the *taue* (田植え). The day I met with these men was the day after *goyō hajime* (御用始), when ordinary work resumed after the rest of the New Year holidays. The men were about to spend more than three months out of their *buraku* and away from their families for the purpose of *dekasegi* (出稼ぎ), of “making money outside.” They were all members of the same *buraku* as the head of the house I had come to stay. This man had arranged their future workplace, and he would also be their leader for the time they were to spend outside of their *buraku* and of their village. Later on I learned that this event was significant for two different aspects. The first is a social and somewhat political aspect. The leader of the group and all its members belonged to the same *buraku*. In the political organization of the village, the central administrative office had a representative in each *buraku*, the *kuchō* (区長), an elected officer who served as link between the *buraku* and the village’s central office. However, in the *dekasegi* group the leader had no such official role within the *buraku*. Instead, he was the person who had a promising relationship with the outside world, a relationship that guaranteed work for the group and also provided a certain degree of a feeling of togetherness that they would usually have in the *buraku*. The second aspect is of a financial nature. The greatly increased economic growth Japan enjoyed at that time offered a welcome opportunity for many men from remote villages to work for money in the great cities. Remuneration gained from this work was a welcome addition to the income generated by farming. The money was needed in part to pay for the education of the children, but even more to deal with a phenomenon that was becoming more and more pressing: the need to acquire farming machinery, such as small tractors for tilling the rice fields and machines for the transplantation of the rice seedlings and for harvesting. The pressure came, I believe, from two different directions that both had a relation with *dekasegi*. *Dekasegi* depleted the communities to a significant degree of their most able manpower, healthy male adults, for long periods. The men had to leave farming work to the women who remained in the village. Farming had become *kāchan nōgyō* (カーちゃん農業), “mothers’

farming” (cf. Berque 1976: 246-47). The use of machines was expected to make working the fields easier and to some degree less tiring for women as well. Another source of pressure was the Agricultural Cooperative that sold the machinery. Its representatives often took advantage of the time when the farmers could be expected to have money, after *dekasegi* or after the harvest, to talk them into buying a machine or to replace an older model with a new and more sophisticated one. In many cases the farmers did not have enough money to buy a machine so they had to take out a loan, but before they could repay the first loan they were made to buy a new and more advanced model, again on a loan so that these deals tended to develop into a vicious circle.

The availability of financial means achieved as a consequence of *dekasegi* together with the rationalization of work in the fields through the use of machinery brought about another development actively supported also by the national government's policy to promote increased rice production (cf. Berque 1976: 238-40). In the course of the history of many villages, the rice fields owned by their households ended up being scattered here and there throughout the village area as a consequence of inheritance or of commercial transactions. With financial assistance from the government villages decided now to reorganize their fields during the 1970s and 1980s in two ways. All arable land was first pooled and then redistributed so that each household was given fields of the same total amount of acreage and, as much as possible, of the same value as they had before the pooling. Redistribution was made after the fields had been reshaped into lots of an equal standard size of generally about three *tan* (反, about two and a half acres) with straight borders *aze* (畦). In this way the fields of one and the same owner were, if possible, arranged into a continuous area. Together with the straightening out of the field borders the procedure allowed an easier and more efficient use of machines. In order to reshape the fields, heavy bulldozers were used. In Hanayama, where the shape of the fields was imposed by the form and condition of the mountainous landscape, such a radical reorganization of the arable land was not feasible. However, many farmers tried to reshape their fields as much as possible to make them more accessible to machines.

The husband of the young couple in the house where I stayed for the first period of fieldwork was the owner of a small company operating two or three bulldozers that were engaged in the heavy work of reshaping the rice fields of many villages in the area. Farmers of Hanayama also asked him to do work for them, but in many cases this involved not so much the straightening out of existing field borders but the building of new fields which meant cutting into the mountain slopes and creating rather high borders between the new fields. As a result, the farmers could produce more rice and therefore ameliorate their income (for more details about the situation in Hanayama see Knecht 2007: 17-22), but the net gain remained ambiguous, because these high borders were not yet solidified enough to withstand heavy rains. The rain water easily

carved deep channels into the border walls and washed much ground into the fields on the lower level causing the farmers strenuous repair work every year. Gradually their enthusiasm for this enlarged source of income began to wane, also because by that time the government had changed its policy and introduced a demand to reduce the acreage, *gentan* (減反), used for rice production (Berque 1976: 238-40; Shōgenji 2014: 23 and 113). Today, as a result of government policy and directions, farmers have begun to grow other crops than rice, such as soba or soy beans, but a good number of newly won fields remain fallow and are completely overgrown with weeds. To avoid this kind of deterioration of their rice fields, farmers who do not or cannot work them sufficiently anymore may try to rent them to others with the means to cultivate them. But this solution has its limits, not the least of which is the rapidly aging village society.

The outright sale of farming land is strictly bound by limits, some of them legal, others emotional. Legal limits are set by the government in order to prevent the danger of insufficiency in food production. Emotional limits are often created in consequence of the thinking that the fields are a vital part of the patrimony created and passed down from a household's ancestors and so cannot be parted with without grave reasons. When, however, a family rents out a field, it does not really part with it, even if it may claim no part, or just a symbolical part, of the field's produce. But renting is by its nature a temporary solution. Two years ago in early summer I noticed a man I had not encountered before as he was tilling a field of my host family right in front of their house. As it turned out, he was from a place outside of Hanayama. Having just retired from a company in spring he had been looking for something he might like to do. Growing rice appeared to be simple enough for him to undertake, so that he came to rent that piece of land. When I visited Hanayama in early fall last year, I was curious to see how that field looked. It had not been tended anymore but lay fallow and had been taken over by weeds. The family told me that the man had lost interest in "farming." Of course, this incident as such is no big deal, but it is, as I see it, indicative of a serious problem with various facets.

One of the facets is the aging of the population I have already mentioned. Although the owners of a house and its fields may still be living in the village they may no longer have the physical strength it takes to care for the fields. If they find nobody to care for them, the fields are left fallow. In this case, fields created only a few years earlier tended to become the first victims. Another facet is the phenomenon of empty houses. The cause may be that the family has left the village looking for more profitable work elsewhere. They may keep their house and return periodically, but do not invest enough time to look after their fields. Or in the saddest case, the owners have died without leaving any descendants. In one of the hamlets I used to visit, in a section of five houses along the main street only two are still occupied fulltime, one is used when the family returns at certain seasons, but the owners of the other two have all died. Because

nobody cares for their houses they are gradually being taken over by the surrounding vegetation.

About twenty years ago, the administration of Hanayama decided to make a sizeable piece of land close to the village center available for sale. Prospective buyers were invited to build on the lots they had acquired. At that time, there was increased interest among city dwellers to spend life in a quiet village and be close to nature. Counting on this rise the expectation was that the village's decision would bring in new people and so help to stem the drain on the village population. But, quite contrary to that expectation, the new settlement today is not even a partial solution to the steady loss of village population. Rather, it is a burden because of the number of houses that are not occupied. If they are, it is only for short periods. The sporadic occupancy of the houses in the settlement may be seen as indicator of another problem. When the village decided to create the settlement, it gave it the nickname "*Furusato Danchi*" (ふるさと団地) with the idea in mind that it would be a place for its occupants to feel "at home" within the village. However, the profile of the *danchi* dwellers among the village population is low. They seem to live in a world apart that is barely connected with active village life. This situation may be supported by a recent event, which also had a considerable impact on life in the villages' *buraku*. This was the merger of all former villages and towns of the District into a city.

As I have mentioned, in pre-city times the individual *buraku* had been close-knit communities, characterized by various activities pursued in common by their members. At that time, the office of the village administration, the *yakuba*, was a place that held them together in many ways. One of them was that practically all its employees originated from these *buraku*. At that time this office was the most important employer in the village providing not only a most welcome additional income for many families, but also a reason that kept many heirs to their households in the village. Just important as the office's function was as a source of income was its function as a place where information between *buraku* was traded. Most visitors did not just come to have their business settled as swiftly as possible. They also used the opportunity to chat with the employees over a cup or so of tea. In this way the office served as something like a knot that bound together all the lines from the otherwise widely separated *buraku*.

Life in the *buraku* itself was based on close personal relationships and on various systems of exchange that involved every single household. That is why people would often say, "In the *buraku* you are like a naked person. Everybody knows everything which means you cannot do anything bad." There were only a very limited number of surnames in the village as a whole; in some of the *buraku* there was practically only one surname to be found. It is therefore not surprising that many of the inhabitants of a *buraku* were more or less close relatives to one another. In addition to this sort of formal relationship, there was another kind that may intensify the first one yet was forged

independent of blood relationships. That was the bond of friendship. This was often the closest bond among neighboring houses. I remember how astonished I was in the beginning of my fieldwork to find one or more visitors in practically any household I visited. In the beginning I was quite reluctant to address the person I had come to talk to, believing that it would be too much of a disturbance to the people already with my prospective partner. But in due course I learned that actually everybody present took it for granted to be involved in the conversation. I now think that this gave me the chance to acquire a wider view of my points of interest than if I had only gathered one person's opinion. Needless to say, these meetings went a long way to make my face and intention known throughout the village.

These relations of friendship could be counted on when somebody needed help in an urgent situation or wanted to get some advice (*sōdan* 相談) when confronted with a tricky problem. But they did not necessarily extend to include all the members of a *buraku*. On the other hand, another kind of relationship included all *buraku* members, not allowing for any exceptions, unless a person had serious reasons to forgo the obligation in a particular case. The typical kind of this type of relationship was the *kō* (講) relation, a partnership for the purpose of certain clearly defined work to be done by the whole *buraku* community. In Hanayama a *kō* was more of a work group than a group with a religious purpose. However, such a partnership did not include every single person of the village. It placed an obligation on every household to cooperate, and usually made a distinction between the obligation of a household's male member and that of a female member. One such *kō* that did not only demand participation in actual work, but also in its preparation, was the *sanjin-kō* (山神講), a *kō* organized for the purpose of thatching the roofs in the *buraku*. In Hanayama, the thatching experts working on the roof were recruited from the respective *buraku*. They, too, were members of the *kō*, but not every household was obliged to dispatch a member to this group if it could not provide an expert thatcher. The leader of the group of thatchers was the *tōryō* (棟梁), an acknowledged expert leader who was invested also with important religious functions to be performed in connection with the work. The non-specialized *kō*-members worked on the ground, gathering and burning the old discarded material and handing over the new material to those working on the roof. To this group each household had to dispatch a male and also a female member. Every day the whole work group gathered at makeshift tables in the open for meals and snacks throughout the days it took to finish the work. At the completion of the work, the *tōryō* put up a ritual wand (*heisoku* 幣束) together with the offerings to the mountain deity on the roof top and recited a prayer before throwing *mochi* (餅) to the crowd waiting on the ground. During the year each member household was obliged to gather a set amount of the kinds of material to be used for thatching. The amount was set at a meeting held on the memorial day, the *en-nichi* (縁日), of the mountain deity in December. On that day the *tōryō* led first the

ritual to the deity. After the ritual he presided over a formal meeting where it was decided what houses should be thatched the following year and how much material each household had to provide. This formal part of the gathering was then followed by a common meal involving a great deal of eating, drinking, and merry making. The only reason to exclude a member from any of these activities was ritual defilement, caused either by a birth or a death that had occurred in that member's household shortly before or during the work period.

Formerly, the transplanting of rice seedlings in spring and the harvest in fall, work done by the whole *buraku* in common, offered occasions for similar gatherings at the work's completion. However, the introduction of machines brought them to an end. The thatching of roofs fell out of use when the villagers decided to rebuild their houses entirely in order to make them more practical and better adjusted to new necessities, such as including a better method to heat the rooms and to respond to the requests of their children to be given their own room. These measures made life easier for the villagers, but they also initiated a trend of making the households of a *buraku* increasingly less dependent on their former relationships within the *buraku*.

In the course of this development the religious celebrations, *matsuri* (祭り), came to face the same fate. When, in 1971, I paid a first short visit to the valley, where I planned to do my fieldwork, it was the day of the largest *buraku's matsuri*, which is held in autumn around harvest time for the local shrine. Not every *buraku* had its own shrine so that those without their own shrine would participate in their neighbor's *matsuri*. As general custom had it, the ritual at the shrine was attended only by the representatives of the households. In the evening of the day, however, a stage play was presented by a traveling group in the largest settlement, while in the most remote *buraku* the house whose turn it was to offer space for the *matsuri* of that year had cleared its front rooms (*zashiki*) to accommodate the villagers who would come to enjoy the *kagura* (神楽) dances performed by the local *kagura* group. Of course, the audience did not only sit quietly and watch; there was a good deal of chatting, eating, and drinking. It was one of the rare occasions for the villagers to enjoy themselves and their community in this way, and for that reason it was much appreciated and lasted late into the night. But in order to make the *kagura* lively and vigorous, young men were required to perform the dances. Nowadays *kagura* has disappeared from the valley's local *matsuri*. Some dances are being taught at the school and shown at the school's cultural festival, but most of the young men who formerly were the main bearers of the village or *buraku kagura* are too busy to afford the time needed to learn the dances. Their having to attend High School away from the village deprives them of the time they needed to invest in order to prepare for *kagura*. As a result, *matsuri* of the *buraku* have lost much of their attraction even if they continue to be celebrated. A certain, although secular, replacement is the Culture Festival cum Sport Event staged for all communities of the former Hanayama

Village. For this event in early fall, the *buraku* form teams or join with a neighboring *buraku* to compete with other *buraku*. Independent from the outcome of the competition and without relation to the rank of a *buraku* achieved in it, the whole *buraku* gets together at the end of the day to celebrate the event. What people confess to enjoy most in these moments is their being together as members of the same *buraku*. It also seems to offer an opportunity to ameliorate the loss of a feeling of community which, the villagers say, has spread in the village as a whole after its merger into Kurihara City.

But even so, it is evident that much of the older bonding between people in the old village has weakened or even disappeared. There appear to be several reasons for this. For one, old age keeps many at home preventing them from earlier ways of communicating. Those who are able to move, move mainly by car so that the streets of the village are empty except for cars. Personally I still make it always a point to walk, but there is nobody anymore to meet on the street and have a short talk. Because cars enable people to move easily further away and to buy what they need at large stores, they also contribute to depriving the local stores of their customers and so are a cause of the sad quietness of the village.

An apparently insignificant happening of about twenty years back seems to me now to be symptomatic of this situation, although at the time I saw it only through the lens of my research interests. A woman was spreading pesticides in her rice field. Since she was not using any means to protect herself from the poisonous dust, I asked her whether she was not afraid that her work could be bad for her health. She said that she was not, but she needed to do it anyway because it was no longer possible to weed the fields as in the old days. Besides, spraying pesticides was more effective than asking the kami for help. She said, "In the old days we used to pray to the kami, but now we have pesticides so there is no need to pray to the kami anymore."

There is no point trying to return to the old village life and to think that it was radically better than life in the present. However, in spite of various strategies that appeared to present a better life to the villagers, they begin to question whether the results turned out to be what they initially expected.

Although possibilities for the villagers growing rice were on a much smaller scale than those of the people down on the plain, it always struck me as surprising that the villagers did not seem to envisage a bigger diversity for their farming. However, they often asked me about the state and methods of farming in Switzerland so that I began to think whether there might perhaps be a chance for some of them to visit Switzerland and see with their own eyes how farmers there run their farms and how they were living. The chance presented itself when the Government of Prime Minister Takeshita decided in the fiscal year 1988 to present each community in Japan with a gift of hundred million yen. It was the time when I decided to consult with the village administration to see if I could try to organize a group of people for a visit of

Switzerland. I did not dare to count on help from the part of the village, but to my surprise the administration not only agreed with the idea of such a visit, they even offered to support the plan with a sizeable gift from the government's gift. The plan was that the group would visit three quite different regions in Switzerland in order to get an impression of the varieties of farming environment and the various methods adapted to them. The regions chosen were the partly flat Swiss Plateau (Mittelland) with relatively extensive dairy farming and the cultivation of a variety of crops on rather large fields, the pre-alpine region with its strong concentration on dairy farming, and finally the alpine region where only small fields are tended on often steep slopes and cattle is sent to regions above 1000 meters of sea level for about half a year during the warm season. I was able to make arrangements with farmers in the first two regions to provide lodging for the Japanese guests and to have them take part in the farming family's daily work. The visitors had no knowledge of the local language, but their own experiences in Hanayama went a long way to help them understand the situation on the Swiss farms. One thing that impressed the visitors very much was that many of the Swiss farmers were using quite old machinery. The farmers explained that this helped them to keep their expenditures low. Because the farmers also had the skills required to repair their machines themselves they could avoid having to purchase new models easily and in short intervals. Since this was apparently a clear contrast to the situation of the farmers in Hanayama, the fact was often mentioned in their later conversations.

More than twenty years have passed since that journey to Switzerland, a land far away from Hanayama. Although Swiss farmers do not grow rice, they are faced with problems and situations quite similar to those of the farmers in Hanayama, that is, the old age of the villagers and continued depopulation. In Hanayama, those who undertook the trip formed a loose group known as the "Swiss group." Its members meet almost every time I have a chance to visit the village. These are occasions to exchange memories of the trip, but it seems to me that the trip has inspired several of the participants not only to try out some of the Swiss farmers' recipes, such as rösti (coarsely grated potato pan-fried in butter or other fat), but also to search for new ideas and ways to use their own particular environment.

Hanayama has undergone changes that made it into a somewhat lonesome village, but those who remain are now making new efforts to turn it once more into a place that offers, perhaps not a rich living, but a satisfying life to those who want to give it a try.

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