

The Soil

Nagatsuka Takashi

**A Portrait of Rural Life in
Meiji Japan**

translated and with an introduction by

Ann Waswo

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Acknowledgments

I first learned of the existence of *Tsuchi* (*The Soil*) some twenty years ago when I was a graduate student in Tokyo collecting material for what later became a book about Japanese landlords. During one of my infrequent but always useful visits to my unofficial mentor, Professor Furushima Toshio, then Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture at Tokyo University, I had somehow felt emboldened to complain that after several months' work in libraries I was saturated with information about crop yields, rent levels and the concentration of land ownership in the Meiji era (1868-1912). 'Couldn't you suggest some books about the texture of rural life at the time?', I asked. Professor Furushima smiled, ruefully I thought, and replied that since he and many other Japanese scholars of his generation had grown up in villages or small towns and knew what the texture of rural life was like, they had not dealt with that facet of the country's agrarian history in their work. 'You ought to read *Tsuchi*', he advised, and so, eventually, I did.

At the outset my intention was simply to mine the novel, as other historians have mined other novels, for anecdotal information about rural values, customs and social relations. That I subsequently took the more radical decision to translate it in its entirety stemmed primarily from my realization that although *Tsuchi* was undeniably a novel it was simultaneously an informal ethnography of a rural community and its inhabitants in the early 1900s and, as such, a valuable historical document.

Except for the dialect the characters speak, which I have found no viable way of capturing in English, and a relatively small number of Japanese terms that are defined in an appended glossary, I have tried to provide as accurate and as complete a translation as I could. I should emphasize, however, that it has been as an historian and not as a specialist in literature that I have approached the task. To be frank, the ethnographic features of the

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novel have always interested me more than its equally careful observations about natural phenomena, and I am quite sure that this bias, despite my efforts to control it, is still reflected in my rendering of the text. I am also quite sure that I have failed to notice, much less to correct, what others more skilled in Japanese than I will detect as blatant errors of translation. For the latter, especially if they result in misconstruction of the narrative, I apologize.

Without in any way tainting them with responsibility for such errors, or for other shortcomings in what follows, I would like to thank Gail Bernstein, Karin Blair, Sarah Metzger-Court, Eiichi Motono, Arthur Stockwin, Richard Waswo, and in Japan Watanabe Yoshio, Shirai Atsushi, Shirai Takako, Noguchi Mitsuo, Nagase Jun'ichi and Kawamura Yoshio (whose own translation of the novel was privately published in Japan in 1986) for the special help they have given me at one time or another during the rather long time it has taken me to get this translation finished. I would also like to thank the University of Virginia and the Inter-Faculty Committee for Japanese studies, University of Oxford, for financial support at the beginning and end of the project.

A.W.
Oxford, 1988

Translator's introduction

The hamlet of Kossho, now part of the town of Ishige, lies on the western bank of the Kinu River in Ibaraki Prefecture, some 44 miles as the crow flies to the northwest of Tokyo. There on the 3rd of April 1879 Nagatsuka Takashi was born, the first son of a substantial landowning family, and there, at his family home and at a desk in the library of the village school during the spring and summer of 1910, he wrote *Tsuchi* (*The Soil*), his only novel. Serialized in the *Tokyo Asahi Newspaper* in 151 installments between June and November of that same year, the complete novel was published in book form in 1912. Three years later, on the 8th of February 1915, its author, not quite 37 years old, died of laryngeal tuberculosis.

The community depicted in *The Soil* is Kossho, the author's native place, and the characters whose lives are examined in minute detail over a period of some six or seven years are all drawn from life, so unambiguously and vividly at times that a few local residents — notably 'Otsugi' (about whom, more later) — are said to have been embarrassed by the special attention the novel focused upon them. Their discomfort, itself indicative of a belief that is still widespread in the Japanese countryside (and perhaps in all small communities everywhere) that not being talked about is proof that one is behaving properly, is also testimony to Nagatsuka's powers of observation and to his determination to provide a realistic portrait of village life.

I do not have the sense that Nagatsuka meant to embarrass anyone in Kossho, least of all 'Otsugi', who emerges in the novel as a warm and sympathetic figure. Nor, on those occasions when he as author/narrator adopts a somewhat didactic tone, is he trying to instruct or uplift his fellow villagers. On the contrary he is seeking to explain the 'old', agrarian Japan and its problems to the denizens of the 'new', urbanized and industrializing Japan, who were in a position to read the *Tokyo Asahi Newspaper* and who

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usually gave no thought to those, still the overwhelming majority of the Japanese population, who were not full participants in the nation's modern transformation. (See, for example, the opening paragraphs of Chapter 7.)

I use the term 'fellow villagers' advisedly, for Nagatsuka, despite being born a wealthy farmer's son and despite having had access to education and experience in the wider world beyond the hamlet of his birth, was none the less a man of Kossho, and albeit in a somewhat attenuated form, a man of the soil. Not long after ill health forced him to withdraw from middle school in Mito in 1896 at the end of his third year of study, his duty as an eldest son required him to begin assisting his mother Taka (the model for Okamisan, the mistress, in the novel) in the day-to-day management of the family's substantial but dwindling acreage of forest and arable land, a task that had been left to her since the late 1880s when her husband Genjirō had first been elected to the prefectural assembly.

Although Nagatsuka was still able to pursue the literary interests he had developed while in school, and for a brief but crucially important period between 1900 and 1902 to study poetry in Tokyo with Masaoka Shiki, an advocate of *shasei* (or 'sketches from life'), more and more of his time was spent in farming the six acres the family cultivated itself with the help of hired labor. From about 1905 he began experimenting with fertilizers, crop rotation, charcoal making, raising bamboo for commercial sale, and other measures he hoped would rescue the family from a financial crisis caused by his father's political career and, it would appear, by his father's sometimes rash willingness to stand as guarantor for the debts of others.

As a result, by the time he wrote *The Soil* Nagatsuka was well aware of the difficulties local farmers faced in wresting a livelihood from the none-too-rich loamy soil of the district and of the disadvantages they experienced now that their community, once well situated for water transport to the capital, had been bypassed by the railroad and become a hinterland of sorts. To these insights were added many details of everyday life in the community he had recorded in one of the notebooks he carried with him at all times, the literary skills he had honed since leaving school in writing poems, essays, and short stories, and a keen ear for status distinctions in speech and for *Ibaraki-ben*, the local dialect.

Like most Japanese novels of the early twentieth century, *The Soil* is slowly paced, more concerned with mood and the minutiae of daily life than with dramatic events. It is filled with descriptions of nature. Indeed, natural phenomena and the experiences of human beings are closely intertwined in the narrative. (See, for

example, the opening paragraphs of Chapters 6 and 14.)

The Soil differs from most other novels of its time in that it focuses not on political or intellectual elites, or upwardly mobile young men seized by identity crises, but on ordinary people. The main characters are members of a tenant farming family. At the outset, the wife, Oshina, dies from a self-induced abortion. Despite her grisly death, Oshina remains a presence in the book thereafter, both by means of a series of flashbacks in which her husband, Kanji, remembers their life together, and by means of Otsugi, their daughter, who was 15 when her mother died and who becomes more and more like her — dutiful, to be sure, but also resourceful, determined and resilient — as she assumes the adult roles of farm laborer, housekeeper, and surrogate mother to her younger brother, Yokichi. Kanji, who is physically strong but more than a little weak-willed, provides Otsugi with ample opportunities to demonstrate her mettle (as did her mother before her) by rescuing him from the trouble he gets into — principally, but not exclusively, by stealing food. It is by means of this trouble and by means of Kanji's strained relationship with Uhei, his dead wife's stepfather, that the reader encounters the larger community in which Kanji and his children live.

What emerges is a very sensitive and, in my view, psychologically sophisticated portrait of its central characters and of the community as a whole. In addition, the novel provides a wealth of information about farming, courtship, marriage,* child-rearing, health care, the lives and problems of the elderly (such as Uhei), folk religion, and funeral customs in the late Meiji era. What I consider its greatest strength is its portrayal of covert and overt tensions within the community: the persistent and sometimes vicious gossip, the petty and not so petty rivalries, and the ways in which conflict was contained.

At only one point in the novel, toward the end of Chapter 19, does Nagatsuka specify the acreage that Kanji has planted to a particular crop. Nor are we told precisely how land ownership and cultivating rights were distributed among the inhabitants of the village. It becomes clear, however, that Kanji is one of a number of poor farmers at the bottom of an economic and social hierarchy that culminates in the master, East Neighbor (so referred to by Kanji because the master's house lies to the east of his own).

Kanji possesses no land and must pay rent in kind to the owners of the fields he cultivates. Again, we are not told precisely how much rent he pays, but we discover that, having paid it, he lacks enough food to tide himself and his family over until the next harvest. Hence his need to seek paid employment during the winter

months and his dependence on, and consequent deference toward, East Neighbor.

While she lived, Oshina added to the family's cash income by peddling foodstuffs in the surrounding countryside and by selling eggs to the other peddlers who came to her door, but their primary activity was, and remains, farming. Kanji's fields are scattered throughout the village — a paddy field directly below the house; two (or more) upland, or dry fields some distance away on which he grows barley, millet, soybeans, winter wheat, and vegetables; and, eventually, some newly reclaimed fields in the forest for growing upland rice. In all probability he cultivated no more than about 2 acres of land in all.

Others in the community, such as Kanji's South Neighbor, had larger holdings (whether owned, tenanted, or a combination of both) and were able to devote some of their land to such potentially lucrative crops as mulberry, whose leaves were fed to silkworms, or to vegetables, which they then took to market to sell. Some owned a horse for use in plowing fields and transporting produce, but most relied on the labor of able-bodied members of their families in the day-to-day chores of farming. For such major tasks as the transplanting of rice seedlings into paddy fields or maintaining the irrigation system so essential to wet rice culture, however, villagers pooled their labor. In addition, more informal labor exchanges (or the exchange of labor for the use of special tools or implements) such as that between Kanji and South Neighbor took place from time to time.

There are two 'outsiders' resident in the village: the policeman and the schoolteacher. In accordance with prevailing administrative practice, these representatives of the Meiji state had been posted to a community other than that of their birth in order to ensure their impartiality and their responsiveness to directives from Tokyo. While the teacher remains a shadowy figure who is referred to in passing but never seen, the policeman is portrayed as a rather arrogant posturer. Neither of these outsiders can be considered a farmer, although both may have raised a few vegetables or some rice on the side, but everyone else in the village, with the possible but unlikely exception of the proprietor of the village shop, depended on farming to an important extent.

In these respects, as a place where labor-intensive, small-scale family farming prevailed, the community depicted in the novel was fairly typical of rural Japan in the early 1900s. That said, it was certainly better off than some of the villages across the Kinu River, where firewood was scarce and floods an almost annual occurrence, and better off still than communities deep in the mountains, where

the soil was poorer, the growing season shorter, and markets even further away. Yet, as noted previously, Kossho had been bypassed by the new railroad and had become a hinterland of sorts. Changes there were — less unsettling, perhaps, but also less remunerative than changes in more favored locations. Only the more affluent local farmers can afford the new biological fertilizers; only East Neighbor regularly travels outside the community and has the literacy and *savoir faire* to deal with such 'alien' forces as the police; only his wife knows of, and is regularly able to take advantage of, the lower prices and higher quality of consumer goods on sale in town.

To be sure, the master and mistress have no worries about getting enough to eat, as Oshina observes in a flashback, and unlike other villagers they do not lace their rice with large quantities of barley to stretch the supply. Moreover, they have employees to do much if not all of the physical labor in producing the food they consume. Yet even allowing for the sentimental bias in Nagatsuka's portrayal of the mistress — he was, after all, writing about his own mother — it is clear that East Neighbor's family remains 'of the village' and involved, directly and indirectly, in its affairs. Precisely because they are relatively affluent and possess knowledge of the wider world, they are part of the cement that holds the community together. They are probably the donors of the good-quality sake and sushi to the participants in the sun-chanting ceremony described in Chapters 22 and 23; they provide advice and casual employment to others; and the mistress, in particular, plays an active role in settling local quarrels. The other villagers respect them and value the services they provide.

If East Neighbor's family was the apex of the community, Kanji's was the nadir, as symbolized by the marginal position of his decrepit house on the westernmost edge of the village. That house was Oshina's natal place, and Kanji, like Uhei before him, had married into her family as an adopted son-in-law. This was a fairly common practice in both rural and urban Japan, resorted to as a means of maintaining the family line when there was no son. The adopted son-in-law, like an inheriting (usually first-born) son, became househead upon the retirement of his wife's father and assumed responsibility for managing the family property (however exiguous), carrying on the family occupation and officiating at memorial rites for deceased members of the family.

Having entered the family by means of marriage, neither Uhei nor Kanji has the full authority of an inheriting son. Thus Uhei defers to Oshina's other relatives when her elopement with Kanji is discussed, and although there were additional reasons for it Kanji

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defers to Oshina throughout their life together. In other respects, however, the situation of both men is fairly typical for the time and place. They had both married women of their own choosing, with whom they had had premarital sexual relations and for whom they had a strong attachment. Not until later did the practice of arranged marriage between individuals who had little or no previous acquaintance with one another — essentially the practice of Japan's warrior class during the preceding Tokugawa period — penetrate to ordinary residents of the countryside.

An element of the warrior ethos that *had* penetrated the countryside was the Confucian ethic of filial piety. A child was held to be indebted to his or her parents for the gift of life and for the nurture received in infancy. That debt must be repaid by respect and obedience and by support of the parents in their old age.

Having come to dislike Uhei, Kanji is less than assiduous in the performance of filial piety toward him. Indeed, the conflict between the two men is one of the major themes of the novel. With his own children, however, Kanji is somewhat more caring, although he is constrained by poverty in demonstrating his affection for them. One senses, too, that he has been psychologically wounded by the loss of his wife. Oshina was more to him than the energetic co-worker necessary to the family's survival; she also supplied the warmth and compassion that he somehow lacked himself. Without her to guide him, he steadily degenerates into a lesser, purely physical being who is gruffer than he intends to be with Otsugi and who ignores many of the norms and values of the community.

The modern reader cannot help wondering if the pampered, unrelentingly self-centered Yokichi is another Kanji in the making. To be sure, it is the major female figures in the novel — first Oshina and then Otsugi — who pamper him the most and who deny themselves food or much-needed rest in the process. Although the terminology would have been unknown to its author, *The Soil* also sheds light on gender-role socialization in the home and the resultant emotional dependence of males on females in late Meiji Japan.

Although the women portrayed in the novel do not conform to the prevailing (and highly problematic) stereotype of the weak and submissive Japanese female, they clearly do occupy a distinct social niche in their families and within the community as a whole. Their speech is generally more polite than that of males; they linger in the kitchen at celebratory meals while their menfolk eat and drink their fill; while Yokichi goes off to the village school, his older sister's formal education consists of sewing lessons. As Kanji's own older

sister, Otsuta, reveals in extreme form, however, they are not incapable of highly manipulative and even self-serving behavior. Perhaps because, as daughters, they were coddled only briefly as infants before being introduced to responsibility, they are strong in a deeper way than the men who perform the heaviest manual labor in farming and who nominally exercise authority over them.

Both men and women take part in the gossip that is a staple of village life. The village is, after all, the center of their world, and they are keenly interested in what occurs or appears to be occurring within it. Like gossips everywhere, they are prone to put the worst possible construction on events until, as in the case of Kanji's relationship with Otsugi, they perceive evidence to the contrary. At the same time, they will rally to the support of those who are in difficulty, as they do in providing condolence money to Kanji after Oshina's death or in aiding (the one more, the other less as befits their respective statuses) both the master and Kanji during the catastrophe that moves the novel toward its conclusion.

Kanji, who is at first too poor to engage in 'simple acts of friendship' and then too stingy to do so, is not really a full-fledged member of the community. Just as he looks down on the women he encounters on his trip across the river to the blacksmith's in Chapter 7 and gains satisfaction from discovering people worse off than himself, so too his neighbors tend to look down on him. We learn in Chapter 14 that he was teased and ridiculed as a child, and in Chapter 8 we see Yokichi being subjected to similar treatment by his playmates. In both cases it is their inferior status that makes them vulnerable.

It is chiefly Kanji's violation of community norms and values as an adult, however, that accounts for the low opinion that others have of him. He will not do the 'proper' thing and marry Otsugi off (or adopt a husband for her) when she reaches 20; he begrudges Uhei the food and shelter to which he is entitled; when he craves fresh vegetables he steals them from within the community instead of from fields in an adjacent village. Immune to the indirect warning he receives from the master, he runs afoul of the law for stealing oak stumps and is only saved from prison by the timely, if somewhat convoluted, intervention of the mistress. What appears to make a good citizen of him at last, in the final pages of the novel, is not pressure from the community to conform — although those pressures are great — but his fear of further loss, further punishment at the hands of the gods, and more trouble with the police.

The ethnographic reading I have just given represents only one of a number of readings of the novel. Over time, *The Soil* has created a series of images of rural life in the late Meiji era. To be more accurate, readers of the novel have responded to its content — which, in a narrow sense, is fixed — in differing ways at different times. As I see it, roughly the following (sometimes overlapping) sequence of readings has occurred: (1) the novel as bestiality; (2) the novel as false consciousness; (3) the novel as exemplar of the healing powers of community; (4) the novel as ethnography (or social history); (5) the novel as paradise lost; and (6) the novel-as entrance examination fodder.

I have already discussed the fourth reading, which flourished in the 1960s and early 1970s and to which many specialists in rural social history still adhere. Let me now describe each of the others.

Natsume Sōseki, who was responsible for the literary pages of the *Tokyo Asahi* in late Meiji, had formed a favorable opinion of one of Nagatsuka's short stories and had invited him to write a novel for serialization in the paper. *The Soil* was the result, and, at first, response to its appearance was good: the critics were impressed, and copies of the paper continued to sell as well as in the past. By September of 1910, however, when eighty installments had been carried, Nagatsuka was contacted by a member of the editorial staff and told, decorously but definitely, that it would be appreciated if he would wrap the story up as soon as possible; it was not a novel for 'the common reader', and female students in particular did not appear to like it.

The discomfort conveyed in this demarche, which Nagatsuka ignored, was more clearly expressed in Sōseki's introduction to the 1912 publication of the novel by Shunyōdō. The introduction is said to have been written in Sōseki's typically candid style. I think there was more to it than that: Sōseki did not like the novel, there is a begrudging tone to what he wrote — something more than candor — and one suspects he would have distanced himself from the project entirely had Nagatsuka not come to him personally to solicit his participation and been ailing from the disease that would kill him in a few years' time. Consider the following excerpts from Sōseki's introduction:

The characters in *The Soil* are the poorest of farmers. They have no education, no dignity. Their lives are like those of maggots hatched out of the soil. Nagatsuka . . . portrays every detail of their almost beastly, impoverished lives. He describes their vulgarity, shallowness, superstitiousness, simple-mindedness, cunning. . . .

Those who read *The Soil* will feel themselves dragged into the mud. That is certainly how I felt. Some may wonder why Nagatsuka wrote a book that is so painful to read. To them I would reply: might it not be beneficial . . . to recognize the tragic fact that in this very era such [wretched] people are living in the countryside, and not very far from the capital? For my part, I hope that young men and women who yearn for pleasure will find the courage to read *The Soil*, even though it is painful. When my daughters are older and talk of going to concerts and plays . . . I will give them *The Soil* to read. No doubt they will complain and ask for some more entertaining romantic novels instead. But I will tell them to read it . . . [precisely] because it is painful to do so. I will advise them to persevere in reading it . . . to learn about the world, so that something of the dark, dreadful shadows of life will be [impressed] upon their character. I firmly believe that among young women (and young men as well) who have grown up in comfort without any cares whatsoever, a devout and pious disposition can only arise from deep within these dark shadows.

In essence, Sōseki is repelled by the image of rural life he discovers: farmers are the repository of all the 'evil customs of the past' that Meiji Japan had renounced, an affront to the Meiji dream of Japan's economic, political, and social transformation into a 'first-rate' country. Nothing can be done for them, but 'the dark, dreadful shadows' they cast can be put to use as a character-building exercise for the privileged young.

During the 1920s and early 1930s a new reading of the novel surfaced, that which I have termed 'the novel as false consciousness'. To Marxist-Leninists and the left in general, farmers were, objectively, an oppressed proletariat. Nagatsuka's treatment of them and of the community in which they lived was too loving, too subjective. Given his class origins, as a landlord's son, it was not surprising, in their view, that he had nothing to say about the causes of Kanji's poverty or about its cure. The novel was, at best, irrelevant; if believed, especially if believed by farmers, it was counter-revolutionary.

In the mid to late 1930s, yet another new reading appeared, as Japan mobilized for war. First in a stage play and then in a film by Uchida Tomu in 1939, *The Soil* became a celebration of community. Kanji, the loner, was brought back to normality and his proper sense of parental and filial duty by the agency of others — the mistress in particular; the slightly built old man who cares for Uhei, his friend from childhood days; and the villagers' collective

wish to preserve harmony. I saw the film, except for its missing first reel, in Tokyo in 1979. I confess that I could not understand all the dialogue — reading *Ibaraki-ben* is difficult enough — but I detected little of the communal malice that I find in the novel. Instead, the emphasis was upbeat; the message — that by working together everything, even the New Order, was possible.

Skipping over the fourth reading, we arrive at the fifth, the novel as paradise lost. This I would date from the late 1970s, when country restaurants (*inaka-ryōriya*) sprang up in Tokyo (and perhaps elsewhere in urban Japan); when a bar serving ‘famine food’ as snacks opened in the Tokyo district of Ikebukuro; when farmers in villages not too far from metropolitan centers began redecorating their homes with sunken hearths (*irori*) and other features of a vaguely remembered rural life so as to attract urban tourists. *The Soil* began to be read again in these years. No doubt a contributing factor was that, as of the mid-1960s, it had entered the public domain: there were no copyrights to pay for, and so a series of easily affordable paperback editions appeared. While the book became a cult novel for literati, who admired its imagery, it became a different kind of cult novel for general readers who admired the simplicity and purity of the rural life it portrayed.

One such general reader was Yamashita Sōichi, a farmer (and writer) from Saga Prefecture, who reported in the pages of the *Asahi Newspaper* that he had been reading *The Soil* once a decade since his youth. The previous time he had done so he had found it rather ‘boring’, but this time the ‘richness’ of the life it portrayed had become clear to him. The villagers lived in harmony with a bountiful nature; they ate safe, uncontaminated food; old people were well-cared for by the community, in contrast to rural Japan today, where the suicide rate among the elderly surpasses that of urban Japan.

Finally we come to the present, and the appearance of *The Soil* in the Japanese-language (*kokugo*) section of the 1986 university common preliminary entrance examination. The opening pages of the novel are quoted, followed by eight multiple-choice questions. Three of the latter test reading comprehension skills in a narrow sense: e.g. the precise sequence of events in Oshina's descent from the forest to the paddy field and on to her own house. One tests understanding of a literary device, and the remaining four concern interpretation of the passage. The last of these is about the ‘meaning’ of the passage as a whole. Two of the five choices offered are clearly inappropriate; two of the others are plausible enough, especially if one had read the entire novel; the ‘right’ answer deals strictly with the opening pages and is rather blandly descriptive.