ESSAY

Poverty and Agrarian Relations in Pre-War Japan: A Reading of *The Soil*

Takashi Kurosaki*

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Takashi Nagatsuka, *The Soil*[1]

In mid-September, 2024, I visited the birthplace of Takashi Nagatsuka, who wrote *The Soil* in 1910. It was published as a series of 151 instalments in the Tokyo *Asahi* newspaper. His birthplace is in the hamlet of Kossho, Ibaraki Prefecture, about 60 km north of central Tokyo, Japan. Before visiting his birthplace, I also visited a small museum corner commemorating his life, located within the community centre of the town of Ishige. Since *The Soil* is Nagatsuka's only novel and he died of tuberculosis at the age of 36 years, three years after its publication as a book, the museum corner mainly commemorates his earlier work, which was in traditional Japanese poetry.

Ishige town and Kossho hamlet are neighbours divided by the mighty Kinu River, which has caused much flood damage throughout history. Both places now belong to the city of Joso, which had a population of approximately 59,000 in 2024. Ishige town is east of the river, spread over a floodplain, while Kossho hamlet, on its west, is scattered over river terraces. I was born in Tochigi Prefecture, which is located on a floodplain of the same Kinu River about 65 km north of Kossho-Ishige, and I immediately found similarities between my birthplace and rural scenes in Ishige town: flat and fertile land organised into large rectangular plots suitable for mechanised paddy production and spread forth as far as can be seen.

* Professor, Institute of Economic Research, Hitotsubashi University, kurosaki@ier.hit-u.ac.jp

[1] The original Japanese edition was published in 1912. The editions used in this review are Nagatsuka (1970) and Nagatsuka (1989).

Takashi Nagatsuka's house and birthplace, now a heritage building, Kossho, Ibaraki Prefecture, Japan.
Photo: Takashi Kurosaki.

In sharp contrast, Kossho hamlet is characterised by a combination of small lowland paddy fields, upland fields for the cultivation of vegetables and fruit, and forests of diverse trees. The scene reminded me of my mother's birthplace in Tochigi Prefecture. The house in which Takashi Nagatsuka was born stands, now silent, in such an environment. Nobody lives there now and the building is maintained as a historical heritage site open to weekend visitors. A very elderly woman, a designated guide, took me around the house. She is a native of the area, currently living in Ishige town, and spoke standard Japanese perfectly. All conversations in *The Soil* in the Japanese original are written in the local dialect. Although the Tochigi dialect (which I speak) and the Ibaraki dialect are very similar, I sometimes had difficulty in understanding the conversation in *The Soil*. In response to this comment of mine, my guide laughed at me and showed me a recent publication in Japanese that had all conversations in the local dialect translated into standard Japanese. "Without the translation guide, no Japanese of the current generations can fully understand this novel!" she said.

When *The Soil* was written in 1910, Japan was a developing country. Its GDP per capita was less than 30 per cent of the GDP per capita of the United States; the GDP share of the primary sector was slightly more than 30 per cent and the employment share of the primary sector was about 60 per cent (Fukao, Nakamura, and Nakabayashi [2017], based on the Hitotsubashi estimates for long-term economic statistics). This suggests that labour productivity in agriculture was about half of the national average. Not only was the average Japanese poor, but poverty was also more prevalent in the agricultural sector than other sectors. Government statistics also show that, in 1912, the number of farm households in Japan was approximately 5.3 million, of which

71.8 per cent cultivated less than 1.0 *cho* (0.99 ha); the number of farm households who owned more than 1.0 *cho* was approximately 1.2 million (Arimoto and Sakane 2021). These numbers indicate an active land rental market in pre-war Japan, in which landless or land-poor households cultivated land owned by large landowners. In the same year, the share of tenant farmer households in all farm households was 68 per cent (comprising 40 per cent owner-cum-tenant farmers and 28 per cent pure tenant farmers), and the area-based tenancy rate was 51 per cent for paddy fields and 40 per cent for upland fields (Arimoto and Sakane 2021). After paying the land rent, whose average value was approximately 50 per cent of the average gross output value of rice (Arimoto 2005), very little remained for tenants to live on. The average Japanese farmer was poor, but tenants were typically the poorest residents of pre-war Japanese villages.

A model of Kanji's house, based on the 1939 film *The Soil*, community centre, Ishige, Ibaraki Prefecture, Japan.
Photo: Takashi Kurosaki.

The Soil is the story of Kanji, a landless tenant farmer, and his family – his wife Oshina, daughter Otsugi, son Yokichi, and father-in-law Uhei. Kanji rents in lowland paddy fields that cover less than half a hectare, in addition to several upland plots of similar size. The family grows various vegetables, including pumpkin, maize, potato, cucumber, and eggplant, as well as upland paddy on its upland fields. The family has no assets other than the standing crops on the plots of rented land, a shabby farmhouse, agricultural equipment such as a hand plough, and poultry. Eggs from the poultry are mostly sold to visiting traders. Since the family cannot afford to keep bullocks, all farming operations are done by human power. Oshina tries to supplement family income by also working as a small trader, but she dies of overwork and infections from a self-induced abortion. After Oshina's death, fifteen-year-old Otsugi takes care of infant Yokichi like a mother. Kanji earns money for the family from non-agricultural wage work, including manual work at

construction sites. Nevertheless, cash incomes and agricultural surpluses are too small to sustain a decent life for the family. The family considers it good fortune to be able to afford meals at all. It cannot afford to eat proper rice, but has to bulk up rice with barley, millet, and yam for their regular staple food. They have frequently to increase the volume of food by diluting it with water and often have to skip meals altogether.

Afflicted as he is by abject poverty and driven to poverty-driven crime such as stealing food and fuel, Kanji often seeks financial and non-financial help from his landlord. The landlord himself does not appear in the book. It is his wife Okamisan (the meaning of the word is "madam" in English) who takes his place. All the main characters in Kanji's family were based on real people. The landlord's family was modelled on Takashi Nagatsuka's own family, with his mother serving as the model for Okamisan. The Nagatsuka family, which owned 66 hectares in the author's grandfather's time, was one of the largest landowners in the hamlet. The Nagatsuka family lost some of its land when Takashi Nagatsuka's father became head of the family, mainly because of his expenses as a local politician.

The 28 chapters of this book describe the experiences of Kanji and his family over a period of some six or seven years. The novel starts with the death of Oshina and ends with the disaster of the fire. In common with other Japanese novels of the time, Anne Waswo points out, *The Soil* is "more concerned with mood and the minutiae of daily life than with dramatic events" (Waswo 1989, p. ix). A distinguishing feature of the novel is its detailed description of nature and the seasons of the year, and their interactions with the routines of rural life. Every description of the wind, crops, birds, and the Kinu River reminded me vividly of my childhood days at my birthplace. The harshness of a poor family's life in a beautiful rural landscape makes a deep impression on the reader because of Nagatsuka's grasp and presentation of detail, by the intertwining of the experiences of human beings (with conversations in the local dialect) and nature in the narrative.

For these reasons, *The Soil* is recognised as the best classical work in Japanese modern literature in the field of realism, a book that paved the way for a new genre of peasant literature (Odagiri 1970). Unfortunately, later novels in this genre were not as successful as the pioneer, and peasant literature as such came to an end after World War II and the implementation of the Agrarian Reform of 1947 in Japan (more on this later).

Ann Waswo, a historian of Japanese landlordism and the translator of *The Soil*, gives us a unique summary of how the book was, is, and will be read:[2]

> 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

[2] The translation is of high quality in general. Furthermore, conversations are in standard English, free from the difficulty of reading conversations in the Ibaraki dialect in the Japanese original.

> 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 (Waswo 1989, p. xv).

Waswo herself admired the book as an informative ethnography of rural social history in Japan, full of the texture of rural life at the time. A contrasting view was held by the leading writer of Meiji Japan, Soseki Natsume, in his introduction for this book (Natsume 1912). Natsume's is the reading that Waswo (1989) termed "the novel as bestiality." Natsume was responsible for the literary pages of the Tokyo *Asahi* newspaper, and, having discovered the high quality of Nagatsuka's short stories, invited Takashi Nagatsuka to write a novel in instalments for the paper. However, as the number of instalments grew, Natsume began, in Waswo's opinion, to dislike the book. Natsume wrote that, because of the portrayal by the author of every detail of the "almost beastly, impoverished lives" of the peasantry (whose "lives are like those of maggots hatched out of the soil"), readers of the novel would "feel themselves dragged into the mud." And yet, to those who might "wonder why Nagatsuka wrote a book that is so painful to read," Natsume wrote:

> 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 (Waswo 1989, p. xvi).

Another reading, Waswo writes, was of the novel as false consciousness. From the viewpoint of "Marxist-Leninists and the Left in general," the author Nagatsuka belonged to the landlord class and he gave no indication of "the causes of Kanji's poverty or about its cure." The novel was also interpreted as an exemplar of the healing power of community, a reading suited to the war mobilisation campaigns during World War II; it was from this perspective that *The Soil* was made into a film in 1939. Another reading is that of the novel as "paradise lost," and, finally, of the novel as "entrance examination fodder." As for the last, *The Soil*, which was used in the reading questions for the 1986 common preliminary University entrance examination in the Japanese language, has not been used in entrance examinations for major universities in recent years. Both the old-style writing and the village life depicted in the novel are becoming remote from young people in Japan today.

I would like to complement Waswo's evaluation with my own reading of *The Soil* to examine issues of poverty and agrarian relations in pre-war Japan. In their excellent review of pre-war development in Japan and the role of the agricultural sector in it, Arimoto and Sakane (2021) demonstrate that land markets in pre-war Japan were successful in ensuring that land was allocated to productive farmers. Arimoto and Sakane (2021) show that on account of well-functioning land rental markets

in pre-war Japan, there was no inverse relationship between farm size and productivity.

Using the technology available at the time, the members of the Nagatsuka family in *The Soil* are not able to farm 66 hectares of land themselves. They farm approximately two hectares and a half, using permanent hired labour, renting out the rest to several tenants, including Kanji. In *The Soil*, Kanji is a hard-working farmer but achieves paddy yields lower than yields achieved by richer farmers in the village for two reasons: a lack of financial resources resulting in lower dosages of fertilizer and manure, and the need for non-agricultural wage work, which forces Kanji to miss the best dates for farm operations such as seeding, weeding, and harvesting. At the same time, Kanji works eagerly for the landlord to convert forest land into crop land. His reward for his hard work is access to firewood and tenancy rights on the newly reclaimed land. Overall, I interpret the land allocation by the Nagatsuka family across tenants including Kanji as consistent with the principle of "land to more efficient users."

In a situation in which resource-poor, income-poor, and risk-averse tenants were direct cultivators of much of the agricultural land, sharecropping was the dominant form of agricultural tenancy in many parts of the world. But this form of tenancy could be associated with lower efficiency than fixed-rent tenancy since sharecroppers are not given full incentive for production, a phenomenon known to economists as Marshallian inefficiency. Arimoto and Sakane (2021) attribute the absence of Marshallian inefficiency in pre-war Japanese agriculture to the prevalence of what they term "fixed rental contracts in kind with state-contingent rent reduction" – or fixed rent with the possibility of rent reduction contingent upon particular circumstances of bad weather. While such a contract retains the features of fixed rent with full production incentive to a tenant farmer, it also provides the tenant with insurance against crop failure.[3] Such arrangements are seldom found elsewhere in the developing world.

Arimoto and Sakane (2021) show us that Japanese villages had in-built mechanisms to deal with these complicated contracts. Local communities and village organisations governed the process of rent reduction and had mechanisms to mitigate hardship. Yields were jointly verified, and the execution and extent of rent reductions were collectively determined. Japanese villages served as collective units for the collection of taxes during the Edo period. Traditional institutions contributed to governing the relationship between landowners and tenants in pre-war Japanese villages.

After every harvest, Kanji pays land rent fixed in kind (rice). One year, Kanji is not able to pay the rent in full because of his need for extra money for consumption and for ceremonies related to Oshina's funeral. Kanji goes to Okamisan for help, and she

[3] The incentives associated with this method have been modelled mathematically in Arimoto (2005).

advances the deficit as credit. Note that she does not reduce the rent; what she does is allow Kanji to pay a smaller amount than the actual rent and treat the deficit as an informal loan from her to Kanji. This clearly shows the nature of state-contingent fixed rental contracts in kind. Under the social norms prevalent in the village, Kanji is not eligible for rent reduction because the contingencies of the situation are not because of the weather, and since he is unable to pay the full amount, he has to borrow the deficit from the landlord. *The Soil* demonstrates vividly how Okamisan and her family play the role of patrons in the village, solving disputes and donating sake and special food for ceremonies.

The co-existence of harsh poverty in Kanji's life and efficient functioning of land markets in *The Soil* is, in my view, a good example of Theodore Schultz's "rational but poor" story (Schultz 1964). Schultz combated the view that the unwillingness of farmers of poor countries to innovate and expand their agricultural sectors was an irrational decision. Instead, Schultz argued that the farmers in these countries were making the most rational decisions in terms of allocation of limited resources. It was the sheer low levels of available resources, technology, and human capital that were responsible for the poverty of such farmers, he argued. Kanji is hard-working but has no formal education at all. He does not have the resources to gain access to new agricultural technology. Kanji is thus a poor but "rational" tenant farmer. Oshina and Otsugi also have no formal education. Otsugi is given an opportunity to attend training classes in sewing, and Yokichi becomes the first member of the Kanji family to enter primary school. While the agrarian economy of the Kossho hamlet may have been fairly typical of rural Japan in the early 1900s, and certainly better than some of the neighbouring villages as suggested by the translator (Waswo 1989, p. xi), the sheer lack of resources and high population pressure made residents with little or no land extremely vulnerable. Landlordism and inequality in the ownership of land were the ultimate reasons for this vulnerability.

There is no information in *The Soil* on the exact amount of land rent and average rice output in Kanji's farm. I expect that land rent was not very different from the level that was typical in Japan, that is, about 50 per cent of the output of rice (Arimoto 2005). Such high rents extracted by landlords gave very little room for tenants to improve their living conditions from surpluses from crop production. This is exactly the case with Kanji. However, thanks to a cash income from land reclamation work conducted by the landlord family, Kanji is able to accumulate some money, enough to avoid skipping meals by the time we reach the later chapters of the novel. But this good fortune is not to last. First, upon retirement, Uhei joins the household of Kanji, increasing the number of mouths to be fed. And then, more critically, an accident causes Kanji's home to catch fire and to burn down completely. After the fire, in the last chapter, Kanji has to ask Okamisan for financial help again. Reality is indeed very cruel to him.

The Soil provides nuanced insights into the nature of poverty in the countryside. In the introductory paragraphs of this essay, I indicated that agricultural productivity in the Ishige town (located in the floodplain on the east bank of the Kinu River) was higher than in the Kossho hamlet (with terraced fields located on the west bank of the river). However, during the period when Kanji lived and worked, the eastern side was probably worse off in respect of productivity than the western side because of frequent floods. At the same time, given the mobility of landless workers and the functioning of land markets, I do not think that there was a big disparity between the welfare levels of relatively poor families on the east and west banks in the early 1900s.

In *The Soil*, Kanji visits the east bank town to have his hand plough repaired; here, he meets a poor old woman who cannot collect enough wood for fuel. There is very little forest in the floodplain, and little access, therefore, to timber for fuel. In sharp contrast, Kanji has access to various types of timber for fuel, and he looks down at the woman and gains a kind of satisfaction from his discovery of people worse off than himself. In another incident, Otsuta (Kanji's sister), whose household is slightly better off than Kanji's in regular years, is a victim of severe floods. She visits Kanji to talk to him about her misfortune, and she gives him cans of boiled beef and a package of salt, which were provided to flood-affected households by the municipality. In return, Kanji, whose farmland and house are not affected by the flood, gives Otsuta rice and onion. But instead of feeling satisfaction from this act of give and take, Kanji feels resentment, thinking to himself that his sister has cheated him in some sense in order to take away some of his very small stock of surplus food. What detailed and informative descriptions of poverty Nagatsuka provides us!

What happened to poverty among the tenants of the Kossho hamlet in the years after the book was written? After the declaration of surrender by Japan on August 15, 1945, democratic reforms were introduced by the United States occupation forces. One of the most important reforms was the 1947 Agrarian Reform. The landlord system was abolished. This meant that (1) all plots cultivated by tenants and owned by absentee landlords were sold to the tenants at a highly subsidised rate; (2) a land ceiling of 3 hectares (applicable to Ibaraki Prefecture and thus to the Kossho hamlet) was imposed on landlord-cum-farmer landowners living in the village, and ceiling-surplus land was sold to the tenants; (3) plots under tenancy above 1 hectare in extent were sold to tenants (even when the landlord lived in the village); and (4) rents-in-kind were prohibited and all land tenancy transactions were to be examined and approved by the Agrarian Committee of the municipality. The size of the farm cultivated directly by the Nagatsuka family was approximately 2.5 hectares. I imagine, therefore, that they kept this land and that the rest of their holding was sold to their erstwhile tenants (including the descendants of the tenants that must have served as models for Kanji). The 1947 Agrarian Reform eliminated landlordism from all Japanese villages, including Kossho, creating in its place a

stable, conservative family-farming system of small-scale owner farmers. These conservative villages in post-war Japan contributed to the high economic growth of the 1950s and 1960s, a period when extreme poverty was dispelled from Japanese villages.

Here are some data from the Agricultural Census of 2010 compiled by the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture. In 1970, the peak year of the Japanese "economic miracle," 111 agricultural households lived in Kossho hamlet. These agricultural households cultivated 39.7 hectares of paddy fields, 57.2 hectares of upland fields, and 5.7 hectares of orchards (0.92 hectares per agricultural household on average). The corresponding figures in 1990 were 92 agricultural households, 27.2 hectares of paddy fields, 25.1 hectares of upland fields, and 3.8 hectares of orchards (0.61 hectares per agricultural household). A part of the reduction in paddy-cultivated areas was because of the set-aside policy that started in 1970 (the total size of paddy fields in the hamlet in 1990 was 31.2 hectares).[4] In 2010, there were only 35 agricultural households in Kossho hamlet, cultivating 29.3 hectares of paddy fields, 22.9 hectares of upland fields, and 2.2 hectares of orchards. The average size of operational holding rose to 1.55 hectares per agricultural household in 2010. This was partially because of land rental markets. In Japan today, many land-owning families who have left farming as an occupation are hesitant to sell their farmland or have difficulty in finding a farmer interested in purchasing it.[5] They therefore lease their plots out to enterprising farmers nearby. In addition, several new forms of group farming are appearing (Takahashi, Fujie, and Senda 2022). The rapid decline in the number of agricultural households in the Kossho hamlet from 1970 to 2010 occurred in a situation in which the total population was stable. The decline thus indicates the accelerating outflow of the workforce into non-agricultural sectors. A few farmland plots in Kossho are even left uncultivated. The world depicted by *The Soil* is hard to find in rural Japan today.

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[4] As a part of the set-aside programme, the Government encouraged shifts from the cultivation of rice to the cultivation of other crops.

[5] Because of the zoning policy, land plots designated as farmland in Japan cannot be converted easily to land for non-agricultural use. To convert agricultural plots into commercial or industrial plots, a complicated procedure at the municipality is required, and the request for conversion is often rejected.

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