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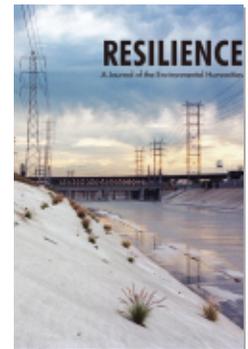
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## Only Yesterday: Ecological and Psychological Recovery

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# *Only Yesterday*

Ecological and Psychological Recovery

ROGER W. HECHT

Of all the films in the Studio Ghibli canon, Isao Takahata's *Only Yesterday* (*Omohide poro poro*) (1991) is perhaps the most underappreciated by American audiences. This fact is understandable, given that it is the only Ghibli film not released on DVD by Disney. The reasons behind this decision can only be speculated, though the most likely reason is that Disney couldn't see an audience for the film, given its adult-focused story. This is a shame, since *Only Yesterday* is one of Studio Ghibli's most emotionally complex films with one of the strongest environmental themes.<sup>1</sup> *Only Yesterday* is a nostalgic film that yearns for a traditional culture and landscape fast disappearing into the hungry maw of rural flight and economic growth. The film speaks directly to the concept of *fudo*, or climate and culture. In the philosophy of Watsuji Tetsuro, climate is not merely the meteorological environment surrounding us; it is the ethical and metaphysical relationship between people and place.<sup>2</sup> In *Only Yesterday* this relationship—the culture and traditions born of a place, as well as the place that is shaped by culture—is threatened by the direction of Japan's economic boom. Also threatened are the individuals alienated from traditions and the land. The film is an effort toward finding a path for psychological, ecological, and cultural recovery.

Set in 1983, *Only Yesterday* tells the story of Taeko Okajima, a seemingly happy twenty-seven-year-old office worker in Tokyo who makes the unusual choice of spending her ten-day vacation working on a farm in Yamagata, a rural prefecture about 180 miles northeast of Tokyo. Both Taeko's boss and her family are equally mystified by her unorthodox

choice of vacation. Her sister Nanako asks, “Why not go to a nice rental cottage and have a delightful life?” But Nanako’s “delightful life” does not satisfy Taeko, nor does her mother’s plan for an arranged marriage to a salaryman in Tokyo. Instead, Taeko wants a rich experience in a place rich with tradition, hence her visit to her brother-in-law’s family farm. Beneath her smiling disposition, Taeko is deeply discontented and seeks some level of authenticity in her life, a kind of authenticity that comes with a direct engagement with the land and Japan’s rural traditions.

The opening shot of *Only Yesterday* provides a good picture of one source of Taeko’s discontent. The camera slowly pans up the blank grid of an anonymous Tokyo office tower, its mirrored windows reflecting only other office towers and clouds in a horizonless blue sky; the only sound is muffled traffic noise from the street below. Inside, an office buzzes with copy machines and phones. Work is done, but it does not seem to be particularly meaningful work. Anonymous hands enter data into computers, calculate figures, copy documents, gesture over diagrams, and stamp bureaucratic papers. The office atmosphere is cramped and stifling, and the job, Taeko later concedes, is not challenging. This stands in stark contrast to the fulfilling atmosphere of the farm in Yamagata. After an overnight train trip and a long drive into the mountains, Taeko arrives on the farm ready to work. As the car picks its way along rutted roads, the camera pans across wide safflower fields, the orange flowers standing starkly in the early morning mist against a backdrop of densely forested mountains. The camera also focuses on the faces of Taeko’s in-laws, creating a slow-motion tableau of sturdy farmers happy that Taeko has arrived but also happy for the work that is about to ensue. Changing shoes for muck boots and her summer hat for a farm woman’s bonnet, Taeko joins her in-laws in the field to commence tearing flower heads from the stalks. The safflowers are raised to make natural dyes and traditional cosmetics. Recalling ancient stories about farm girls picking flowers until their fingers bled, she removes a glove and pricks herself on the safflower’s thorns, perhaps as an act of historical solidarity. The camera lingers on the group picking flowers as the valley slowly fills with light and the sun crests over the mountain-tops. The scene is one of labor but also of ritual and tradition. The farmers stop picking for a moment to catch the view and gently bow to the rising sun as they would to a rural shrine. Taeko, too, joins in with the prayer before quickly resuming work.

That Taeko works instead of merely taking a week-long holiday in the country is central to her experience. She is not visiting a park or a resort; this is the *satoyama*, the traditional agricultural landscape of Japan. *Satoyama* literally translates as “village” or “home town” (*sato*) and “mountain” (*yama*), or mountain village; but it has come to mean much more.<sup>3</sup> Agriculturally, it has come to represent a disappearing model of sustainable stewardship.<sup>4</sup> Culturally, it is seen to embody Japan’s purported harmonious coexistence with nature. The *satoyama* landscape—a mosaic of forest, farmland, rice paddies, creeks, and canals—is not nature so much as a secondary nature that is highly modified by human intervention, such as field clearing, canal building, and coppice forestry. It is also a landscape deeply tied to Shinto and Buddhist rituals, home to the “eight million *kami*,” or animistic spirits, that must be honored and appeased through shrines and rituals to calm nature’s unruly forces.<sup>5</sup> It is a landscape evoked throughout Japan’s long literary and artistic history and is the central landscape of Hayao Miyazaki’s *My Neighbor Totoro*. Unlike the Western pastoral tradition—in which landscape is an invitation to ease and rest from work and which calls on us to adopt the role of observer of the land, not a participant in it—the *satoyama* is a working landscape. Working the land is basic to its essential character, both ecologically and culturally.

And work is what Taeko does. In the course of her visit, she helps the family process safflower blossoms into dye, soaking and pressing the flower heads into small balls that are sun dried and will later be processed into cosmetics. During her stay on the farm, Taeko becomes a constant companion of Toshio—the self-styled, educated, proletarian farmer. A handsome and ambitious young man, Toshio is an impressive foil to the Tokyo salaryman Taeko’s mother would have her marry. Having once left the farm for the city, as most of his friends had done, Toshio has given up a company job to return to his home and take up organic farming. He quotes Basho; listens to Bulgarian folk music; drives a tiny, underpowered car; and identifies as a peasant. For Toshio, success is not material wealth but the satisfaction he takes in his work. Farming is his noble cause, and he discourses at length about the threats to farming posed by development and the lure of the city but also about the challenges and satisfaction of organic farming. Soon, Taeko is helping Toshio weed his rice paddies by hand, milking his cows, and tying bags around tree fruits to protect them from insects. In the course of

her labor and Toshio's lectures, Taeko's understanding of the nature of the *satoyama* deepens; and with it, her love of the place.

Yet as Taeko falls more and more in love with the rural life of Yamagata, other sources of her discontent bubble to the surface in the form of memories from when she was ten years old, memories of events that seem to conspire to sap the confidence of an otherwise bright and lively child but are really part of the acculturation process of any Japanese girl. Taeko's first memory involves her own alienation from the countryside. Because her family has lived in Tokyo for several generations, she has no ancestral home to return to during vacations. So while all her fifth-grade friends go to the countryside to visit grandparents, Taeko is stuck alone in a Tokyo park performing calisthenics exercises to tape-recorded music. When she pleads with her mother to go somewhere for vacation, Taeko's older sisters trick her into accompanying her grandmother to a spa hotel in Atami, where she passes out from boredom and the heat of the *onsen* baths. This is the source of her yearning to visit the countryside. When Taeko reminds her sister of this event as she prepares to leave for Yamagata, Nanako brushes it off dismissively: "What a burden your past must be." Indeed, Taeko's past is a burden of small and large humiliations. Not all of Taeko's memories are traumatic. She recalls plenty of charming scenes from the mid-1960s, including the introduction of miniskirts, the arrival of the Beatles, popular TV puppet shows, and her first crush on a boy. Rather than dismiss these memories or suppress them, Taeko makes them a usable past to see if she cannot "look back and figure out who I am."

Who Taeko ultimately appears to be is a woman desperate for meaningful ties to place and tradition, but ties she can make on her own terms. She is also a woman plagued by self-doubt. Living in the shadow of two high-achieving sisters, Taeko frequently fails to meet her family's expectations, especially where her achievements at all deviate from the social expectations of how a respectable girl behaves. For instance, instead of receiving praise for writing a strong essay in school, Taeko earns a scolding from her mother for not eating all her lunch: "The kid who can eat all her food is more respected than the one who can write an essay." When she doesn't do well in math, Taeko overhears her mother explain to her sisters that she "isn't normal." When she discovers an area where she does excel—theater—her conservative father forbids her from accepting a part in a play. To make things worse, Taeko's mother

urges her to suppress her disappointment in order to spare the feelings of the girl who did get the part. By the time she is an adult, Taeko has deeply internalized her family's judgments and negations. Confessing her problems with math to Toshio, Taeko calls herself "weak minded" and "picky" and attributes both to her unhappiness: "It seems like people who could divide fractions easily, they would have little trouble in life after that." She relates an anecdote about a friend who was also weak in math but who memorized the formula and succeeded. "Since then, she grew up doing what she was told and had no troubles. Now she's a mother with two kids." This anecdote cuts to the heart of the matter. Her friend has fulfilled the very goals Taeko's family has set for her. Her friend has "no troubles," but is she happy? We do not know. What we do know is that doing what she was told never satisfied Taeko. The traditions she is expected to follow divorced from their context in *fudo*, in culture born of the climate, seem meaningless. Yet not doing what she is told has left her unfocused and empty.

However, Toshio's encouragement and the example he provides in his single-minded dedication to farming help jolt Taeko out of her funk. This is not to say that Taeko is cured of her self-doubt, but Toshio's insights help her to evaluate her life. He has given her permission to find the right path forward. That right path, it turns out, involves leaving Tokyo for a life on the *satoyama*. Just as Toshio, through organic farming, is helping to recover the *satoyama* and its traditions, his encouragement and her own brief experience with the more meaningful work of farming help Taeko to recover as well.

Susan Napier describes *Only Yesterday* as a mixture of "ideology [and] wish fulfilling fantasy."<sup>6</sup> This is undoubtedly true. *Only Yesterday* is, at heart, a love story. But it is not simply about the growing romance between two kindred spirits; it is also about love for the culture of the land and about finding an authentic life. Taeko may end up where her mother and society want her to be—married and settled in a home—but she has reached that point on her own terms—terms that are meaningful to her.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Roger W. Hecht** is an associate professor of English at SUNY Oneonta, where he teaches American literature and creative writing and serves as the director of the International James Fenimore Cooper Conference. He has published essays

on Herman Melville, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and the literature of the Anti-Rent War. His books include *The Erie Canal Reader, 1790–1950* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003) and a collection of poetry, *Talking Pictures* (Somerville, MA: Červená Barva Press, 2012).

#### NOTES

1. For this essay, all quotations from *Only Yesterday* come from a version dubbed for the Anglophone market, but it is not available in North America. It can be found online at <http://www.animeplus.tv/only-yesterday-movie-online>. At the time of this essay's submission, *Indie Wire* announced that GKIDS, a distributor of children's animated films, will release *Only Yesterday* for the North American market sometime in 2016, to mark the movie's twenty-fifth anniversary. See Beck, "GKIDS Acquires 1991 Isao Takahata Anime Classic 'Only Yesterday.'" 2. See Befu, "Watsuji Tetsuro's Ecological Approach." 3. See Knight, "Discourse of 'Encultured Nature' in Japan," 442. 4. See Takeuchi, "Rebuilding the Relationship between People and Nature." 5. See Iwatsuki, "Harmonious Co-existence between Nature and Mankind." 6. Napier, *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle*, 279.

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