

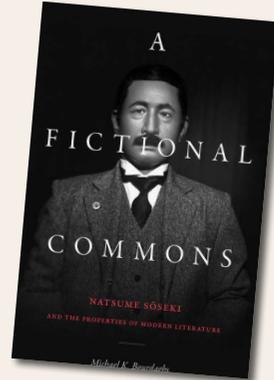
BOOK REVIEW

A Fictional Commons: Natsume Sōseki and the Properties of Modern Literature

By Michael K. Bourdaghs

Duke University Press, 2021
240 pages.

Reviewed by Gouranga Charan PRADHAN



The humanoid robot with dark suit and black necktie on the cover of *A Fictional Commons* undoubtedly resembles the noted Japanese novelist Natsume Sōseki. It can even speak, albeit in the voice of Sōseki's great grandson. And the technologies and know-how to develop this android are mediated by underpaid software engineers working in the so-called silicon valleys of Bangalore and Shenzhen. The android belongs to many.

Products of the embodied forms of accumulated labor, whether literary fiction or artificial intelligence, are common property. In this volume, Michael K. Bourdaghs revisits Natsume Sōseki's works to remind us that Sōseki also belongs to all, and so does his literary output. Bourdaghs has worked extensively on Sōseki, and the present volume is a welcome addition to the existing literature. But as the subtitle of the book suggests, Bourdaghs here attempts something new: exploring vital questions of cultural and intellectual property ownership, especially of literary fictions, through Sōseki's works. Bourdaghs persuades us that "literature becomes a playful, noninstrumental site for imagining a different economy, a new commons, alternative modes of communal owning—which is to say, sharing" (p. 12).

The volume consists of four chapters, thematically linked but independent, as well as a critical introduction and extensive conclusion. The first chapter discusses how the nonhuman animals in Sōseki's novels—a nameless cat, a trickster badger, and a stray sheep—offer possibilities to decenter humans, while showing how the modern concept of "property ownership" is an arbitrary one. The animal protagonists in Sōseki's works complicate the human ownership of animals, showing humans under the gaze of nonhuman animals and thus raising questions regarding the extent to which humans own their own selves.

The second chapter considers Sōseki's portrayal of madness in *The Gate* (*Mon* 門, 1910) as another form of ownership, one with the potential to disrupt both economic ownership and ownership of the self. This understanding of madness allows for literary production without claiming ownership. Bourdaghs demonstrates how *The Gate* employs American psychologist William James's notion of stream of consciousness to show the protagonist as "unable to function as a proper subject in the modern regime of ownership" (p. 77), suggesting that he owns nothing, including his own self.

While chapter 2 examines ownership from the perspective of the still-evolving modern scientific discipline of psychology, chapter 3 introduces sociology, another new discipline that Sōseki extensively employed to question the modern regime of property ownership. Bourdaghs focuses on *To the Spring Equinox and Beyond* (*Higan sugi made* 彼岸過迄, 1912), another famous novel, to show how it “wriggles and twists, groping its way toward an experimental ‘way out’ from the ideologies of property that were hegemonic in the Meiji period” (p. 94). Sōseki seeks to become a “knowing subject” within the field of sociology, an academic discipline holding racially-inflected prejudices towards non-Western societies. This complicates Sōseki’s position, for he needed sociology to develop a radical definition of literature that transcended nation-states and linguistic divisions while countering Western academia’s prejudices. Sōseki here borrows James’s notion of experiences and memories as forms of personal property, but transforms it radically. James claimed that possessive individualism is nontransferable, but Sōseki argues in *To the Spring Equinox and Beyond*, *Kokoro* (1914) and other novels that literature makes such private property transferable. He adapts the ideas of the French sociologist Marcel Mauss to the field of literature, but never forgets to critique Western sociology. Although Bourdaghs does not explicitly make this point, his argument shows that Meiji intellectuals could cross disciplinary boundaries to experiment with innovative and at times radical ideas, as Sōseki does in his search for a new definition of literature. We have lost this epistemological approach, perhaps due to an undue emphasis on the maintenance of rigid disciplinary boundaries.

In the penultimate chapter, Bourdaghs turns to *Kokoro* to examine the critical but rarely debated problem of property inheritance in the Meiji period, looking particularly at the younger brothers, women, and colonial subjects paradoxically “defined as being potentially both a subject and object of ownership—that is, as being simultaneously a possession and a possessor” (p. 124). Traditionally, property inheritance in East Asia was reserved for the eldest son, a norm that Sōseki interrogates through his fiction. In *Kokoro*, for instance, Bourdaghs finds at least eight instances of last wills, of which all except one falls apart. Sōseki’s protagonists in many of his novels prefer to forfeit their right to inheritance. Bourdaghs claims that this allowed Sōseki to disturb both traditional and modern property norms through his fictional productions that were otherwise impractical in the real world.

The concluding chapter touches upon a variety of leitmotifs, including world literature, translation studies, and copyright laws, but the unifying thread here remains ownership, particularly how Sōseki skillfully avoided being pigeonholed within world literature by not being drawn into it, refusing to have his work translated into Western languages. Sōseki’s theory of literature, Bourdaghs argues, “encourages forms of reading that poach literary texts from existing canons and release them into new commons, moving from an economy defined by scarcity to one defined by plentitude” (pp. 148–149). Bourdaghs also touches upon a variety of other problems, including the division of intellectual labor, the disciplinization of scholarship, and the divide between the humanities and the natural sciences, and by extension, the so-called crisis of the humanities. We are still seeking answers to many of these issues today.

Bourdaghs mentions that some of Sōseki’s novels are based on East Asian literary genres, but he does not explore the influence of East Asian literary traditions. Might Sōseki’s “fictional commons,” a shared artistic pool, originate there? The Japanese poetic tradition of *honkadori* (allusion), for instance, not only celebrated past literary repertoires but actively

borrowed from a common cultural and aesthetic pool to produce new literature. Do such past literary practices, with which Sōseki was well acquainted, have any bearing on his idea of a fictional commons?

Japanese scholars often complain that North American Japanese studies researchers do not use enough primary sources. But Bourdaghs's volume is an exception. He makes extensive use of Japanese and Western sources, both primary and secondary, drawing seamlessly on work in multiple languages. This volume is extensively referenced and comes with an exhaustive list of bibliographic studies, constituting almost a quarter of the whole volume, which will be of immense help to both students and scholars interested in Sōseki, and in Meiji- and Taisho-era Japanese literature more broadly.