



PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT BY  
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# TO CREATE HEAVEN ON EARTH

*A sacred relationship between land, farmer, and consumer*

**Susumu Hashimoto** is the happiest person I've ever met. His smile is constant and electric. Even in the rain, his face seems to glow.

He attributes his deep joy to being a farmer, a life he began envisioning at seventeen. Considering that farming in many places is characterized by debt, dispossession, and even suicide, it struck me as odd for a city boy to dream of agriculture. And yet that was Hashimoto: he saved up money for years working as a deliveryman, all for the chance to rent a scattering of fields in a village fifty



miles south of Osaka, Japan. He's thirty-seven now, and sure he'll be a farmer forever.

Hashimoto will gladly—*gleefully*—explain. “What I do is more than farming. It's learning how to care for life and improve society,” he told me. “I believe the farmer is the closest servant to God.”

Intrigued, I asked him what he hoped to accomplish through his work. “World peace,” he replied, then smiled and waited for the next question, as if there were nothing more to say.

Hashimoto is not alone. What he does is called *shizen nouhou*, or natural agriculture. It's part of the devotional practice of the spiritual group Shumei, which claims 370,000 members in Japan and around the world.

I was writing a book about natural agriculture when I met Hashimoto, and the research felt like cracking a code. Whenever I asked about someone's practical objectives, I got an answer as enigmatic as Hashimoto's. While interviewing a panel of natural agriculture's official leaders, all of them in gray suits, none of them speaking English, I asked the question,

“What are your short- and long-term goals?”

Their interpreter replied, “We have only one goal: to create heaven on Earth.”

After months of perplexing conversation I realized the problem. I was approaching natural agriculture as a way of farming, like dry-farming or biodynamics. Instead, I needed to absorb the critical piece that Hashimoto had offered: natural agriculture is more than farming.

The practice is based on the teachings of Mokichi Okada, whose unique philosophy came as a response to living through the two world wars. He believed that healing the world would come from relearning how to respect life. One of the avenues Okada chose for this was agriculture, which he saw as humans' fundamental connection to the natural world. He taught that humans ought to stop treating the Earth as a thing to subjugate and instead adopt a relationship of humble coexistence. Through his new way of growing and eating food, humans would learn to trust in the Earth to sustain them, and in return agree to care for it. As people learned to show respect, gratitude, and compassion toward the

natural world, they would do the same for all beings, including their fellow humans. So while on the surface natural agriculture looks like plain old farming—planting, harvesting, selling—it is actually, as Hashimoto said, a way of learning to care for life and improve society.

Rather than try to control their land, natural agriculture farmers largely surrender themselves to their environment. When insects descend, for instance, instead of spraying the pests, farmers watch them, trying to learn how to make the plant stronger so it can withstand future pests—even at the expense of the crop in the field. They eschew additives of any kind, including compost. In their eyes, adding something to the land means you don't trust its inherent power. Instead, they rearrange their plans to work with what the soil gives them naturally. It means lower yields, but their goal is not quantity; it is to cultivate compassion, respect, and gratitude.

While the food these farmers produce is a sacrament, it's also the daily bread for thousands of nonfarming Shumei

members. In the greater Tokyo area, a network of eleven farmers feeds fifteen hundred urban families, supplying all their produce, rice, and soybeans.

Were the farmers going it alone, they would fail; the growing practice requires too much labor for too little product to sustain a conventional business. What makes natural agriculture work is that it's practiced by farmers and consumers alike. While the farmers farm, the consumers create a support system that enables the farmers to focus on spiritual priorities rather than production. The traditional hierarchy of agriculture—land serves farmers, farmers serve consumers—is replaced with a three-way partnership.

Consumers run the distribution system. They take orders, collect money, package, sort, and deliver. They publish newsletters, organize farm tours, and host celebrations. Because supporting the farmers means adopting a seasonal diet, they give cooking classes. To replace commercially processed foods like miso and tofu, they learn to process





soybeans at home. And when farmers need them in the field, they become farmers, too.

Hashimoto tells a story from a few years ago, when he was barely breaking even. He wanted to plant more rice, but could hardly keep up with the weeds in the paddies he already had. Then it came to him: he would rent more fields and adopt them out to his customers. After he planted, they would do the weeding, as well as contract to buy a year's worth of the rice at a price that reflected their paddy's total yield—incentive to do their work well.

His customers weren't naturally drawn to farming—these were people with clean fingernails and suburban lives—but Hashimoto convinced them with his fervor. Ten people signed up, and throughout the summer they worked, barefoot and bent over in the blazing sun. They spent far more time there than anyone had predicted; some drove five hours just to get to the farm. In the end, the price for their rice was markedly higher than in a supermarket,

even for organic. By conventional standards, not a great deal.

Yet the next year they all signed up again. Turns out they had enjoyed every minute. They had brought their whole families, and their children had relished the chance to catch frogs and squish mud through their toes. The families had asked Hashimoto to teach them to do more than weed. One man, Hideki Oonishi, had even driven out in winter to visit his fallow field. After planting the next spring, Hashimoto watched him photograph the seedlings as if they were his children.

The extra rice kept Hashimoto in business, but what mattered more to him was the new crop of people in his fields. He explained that as a natural agriculture farmer his work is to care deeply for plants and land; in doing so he produces not just food, but love. Every person who joined him meant that love multiplied. He told me that little by little—family by family—that love would lead to something bigger. Then he smiled, and there was nothing more to say. ✎

