

ATARASHIKI MURA VERSUS XINCUN

**ON THE CHINESE RECEPTION OF A
JAPANESE MODEL OF ALTERNATIVE
LIFESTYLE AS A CASE STUDY ON
STANDARD AND DEVIATION**

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Introduction

Atarashiki mura (new village), a Japanese commune founded in the early 20th century, and its Chinese reception on it reflect, in two ways, the issue of standard and deviation. On the one hand, the project of an alternative lifestyle itself (which this Japanese commune was and is) is already a conscious deviation from the standard norms of the framing society; although, to a certain extent, it still carries elements of the latter in itself.¹ On the other hand, the original model inevitably changes during the reception process due to the circumstances it takes place in as well as due to the specific interests out of which it is carried out at all. Hence, the original model acquires a very own identity in this process. Thus conclusions on these changing factors can be drawn precisely from the deviations, which help to define the interrelatedness between standard and deviation as well as their respective individuality. To demonstrate this, the present article takes up the case of the Atarashiki-mura-movement and its Chinese reception.

The Atarashiki-mura-movement

Atarashiki mura was founded in 1918 by the famous Japanese writer Mushakôji Saneatsu (1185-1976).² Mushakôji was born into an aristocratic family; he attended the elite school Gakushûin, which was only reserved for the upper class, and he founded, together with some other graduates from the same school, the literature and art magazine *Shirakaba* (birch tree) in 1910, one of the most influential magazines of the Taishô period (1912-1926). He advocated a form of humanism and pacifism which was strongly shaped by Tolstoy; however, it bears mentioning that he distanced himself from Tolstoy's religiously motivated moral rigorism. In 1918, Mushakôji, who was well-known as the charismatic central figure of the *Shirakaba*

¹ Cf. Christoph Brumann: *Kommunitäre Gruppen in Japan: „Alternative Mikrogesellschaften als kultureller Spiegel“*. In: *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, Vol. 117, 1992, pp. 119-138. One may add that there are that not only cultural peculiarities reflected but also the circumstances of a particular time, since “cultures” and “societies” are no a-historical fixed entities but permanently changing.

² For more information about him, see Watanabe Kanji: *Mushakôji Saneatsu*. Tokyo 1984.

group in Japan, put his earlier planned concept into action and established a commune in the countryside, where he wanted to realise a “truly human lifestyle”. To him, this meant a fraternal and free living together, with property shared by all. Physical labour and intellectual-artistic self-cultivation should form a new human race. The rules of living together were reduced to a minimum. Referring to Tolstoy’s claim that everybody should do physical labour (i.e. mainly working on the fields), Mushakôji declared this an obligation to humanity; nonetheless, he added personal self-cultivation as an equally important goal. In this sense, he emphasised that enough time must be given to leisure and artistic work. Those who kept up with their work schedule should be supplied with everything necessary for living. Physically weak and particularly highly qualified people were, however, granted exceptions with regard to labour obligations.³

Economically, the commune, whose members usually were young people inexperienced in farming and agriculture, remained for a long time dependent on external funds; especially those of Mushakôji.⁴

The concrete way of life was not very revolutionary, although the commune understood itself as the antithesis of the framing society, hoping to set an example for the whole society, even the entire world, to change in a peaceful way. The premise was that societal change was dependent on the change of every individual.

Basically, the commune saw itself as herald of a better world and thus regarded every confrontation with the framing society as superfluous. General civil obligations were met without argument, and societal institutions such as marriage and family were accepted. The most explicit deviation was the decision for an own festival calendar, which initially included, e.g., the birthdays of Buddha, Jesus, Tolstoy and Rodin. The only festivity that was adopted from the framing Japanese society was the New Year’s Festival. The choice of these festive days itself revealed the spiritual orientation towards a morally-aesthetic ideal.

³ Mushakôji initially published his project in Shirakaba and in several daily newspapers. From July 1918 onwards, his own magazine *Atarashiki mura* was released. There are in total three collected work editions of Mushakôji: a twelve-volume edition (1923-1928), a twenty-five-volume one (1954-1957) and an eighteen-volume edition (1987-1991). Important articles of Mushakôji concerning *Atarashiki-mura* have also been compiled in Watanabe Kanji’s volume: *Mushakôji Saneatsu: Atarashiki mura no tanjô to seichô* (Mushakôji Saneatsu: Formation and Development of the New Village), released in 1992 and published in the village.

⁴ According to Plath, the commune became self-sustaining only after 1960, after they had established professional chicken breeding. (David W. Plath: “The Fate of Utopia: Adaptive Tactics in Four Japanese Groups.” In: *American Anthropologist*. Vol. 68, 1966, pp. 1152-1162. See p. 1154). The commune was further supported by a promotional group.

The members of the commune were aware about the fact that they could only exist in interaction with the framing society and thus avoided any provocation. As there were barely occasions that offered confrontations, the commune could exist undisturbed, and has survived until today.⁵

Xincun, gongdu and huzhu

Atarashiki mura became known in China via the activities of Zhou Zuoren (1885-1967), Lu Xun's brother.⁶ Initially Zhou, who was a literary man himself, had been interested in the same aged Mushakôji as a writer. Since he had studied in Japan in his youth (for a while also at the same time with Lu Xun) and furthermore, for his whole life he had tried to familiarise his fellow countrymen with Japan, he attentively followed the Japanese literary scene and thus also the magazine *Shirakaba*. In addition to that, Zhou himself was a supporter of humanistic ideals and hence found a soulmate in Mushakôji.

In March 1919 Zhou published his first article on Atarashiki mura introducing the commune – mostly its ideals – on the basis of Mushakôji's texts.⁷ In the summer he even personally went to the commune and published a detailed report that reflected his journey as a spiritual experience:

I lived four days in Atarashiki mura and then I visited several branches of it.⁸ I did not only closely inspect everything but I also had the chance to experience a rightful human life. This is the greatest joy of my life and this report is written for the memory of it... Obligatory labour is part of personal life. The joy of working can satisfy more than the bare necessities of life; but to do so, it has to be based on love and reason and exceed the instincts without colliding with human nature. That way one can achieve inner peace and good conscience in spite of hard physical labour. Only those who have experienced it, are able to understand this spiritual joy. How happy the people of Atarashiki mura are! I wish all the people in the world could share this joy!⁹

⁵ On the "official" history of Atarashiki mura see its own village publications: Nagami Shichirô (ed.): *Atarashiki mura gojûnnen* (50 years of Atarashiki mura), 1968; Watanabe Kanji (ed.): *Nenpyô keishiki ni yoru atarashiki mura no nanajûnen* (1918-1988) (70 years of Atarashiki mura: A Chronology), 1989. The original "village" was situated in the southeast of Kyûshû island and still exists there on a very small scale. In 1939 a new site close to Tôkyô was chosen that nowadays is regarded as the actual Atarashiki mura.

⁶ See William C.L. Chow: "Chou Tso-jen and the New Village Movement." In: *Hanxue yanjiu* ("Chinese Studies"), vol. 10/1, June 1992, pp. 105-134.

⁷ *Riben de xincun* (The Japanese Atarashiki mura). In: *Xin qingnian* (New Youth), vol. 6/3, pp. 266-277.

⁸ Apart from the actual "village", more branches existed in Japan in which the supporting members were organised.

⁹ *Fang riben xincun ji* (On the visit at Atarashiki mura). In: *Xinchao* (New Wave), vol. 2/1, October 1919, pp. 69-80. Cited passages see p. 69 and p. 76.

Zhou's Atarashiki mura propaganda was met with great interest in China and the term "xincun" (new village) spread quickly.

The openness to such a project must be partly regarded against the background of a growing discontent amongst students towards overcome societal structures. This is why the word "new" was used in an almost inflationary way.¹⁰ Beyond that intellectuals had the growing feeling to live at the expense of the working population. These thoughts had also moved Zhou before his visit to Atarashiki mura; which was why "peace of conscience" was so important to him.¹¹

In the spirit of optimism during the May Fourth Movement people wanted to abolish the boundaries between work and study; also, people tried to achieve conciliation of class antagonism between the working population and the intellectuals. In this way it was hoped to change society on a micro level in a peaceful way. To do so, Atarashiki mura was a welcome role model.

Similar approaches had already been followed by Chinese in and outside China for several years. Especially Li Shizeng and Wu Zhihui, who had founded an anarchist circle with friends in Paris at the end of the Qing-dynasty, made the effort several times, together with Cai Yuanpei, to establish programs that combine work (gong) and study (du or xue). Their main goal was to enable Chinese students, who did not have sufficient ways of funding, to study in France; and further, to supply those Chinese workers, who had compensated for the labour shortage in French factories during the First World War, with education. In both cases, however, the connection between work and study remained on a sub-ideological/pragmatic and principally education-oriented level.¹²

Only until the time of the May Fourth Movement did some people also see the problem in terms of class antagonism, which was supposed to be overcome, and as a call for a new lifestyle for everybody: a lifestyle in which labour and education were integrated with each

¹⁰ Cf. the magazine titles "New Youth", "New Wave", "New China" etc., or terms such as "new life" or "new people" etc.

¹¹ *Fang riben xincun ji*: op. cit. (see note 9), pp. 69-70.

¹² For activities until 1916 see *Lüou jiaoyu yundong* (Education Movement for Chinese staying in Europe), Tours 1916. For materials on later programmes see *Fufa qingong jianxue yundong shiliao* (Historical materials on the movement "Travelling to France for diligent work hard and frugal study"), 3 vols., Beijing 1979-1981; Zhang Yunhou et al. (eds.): *Liufa qingong jianxue yundong* (Movement for diligent work and frugal study in France), 2 vols, Shanghai 1980 and 1986; Chen Sanjing: *Qingong jianxue yundong* (Movement for diligent work and frugal study), Taipei 1981.

other.¹³ Tolstoy's idealisation of physical labour also played a certain role in the background, and the term "holiness of labour" (*laogong shensheng*) was spreading.

The conviction that such a thing was possible was drawn from Kropotkin's theory of "mutual help" (*huzhu*), which says that humans are attuned to cooperation based on their biological constitution. In contrast to the social Darwinist interpretation of Darwin's Evolution Theory as an inner societal struggle for survival, Kropotkin emphasised that this struggle is happening with regard to nature and other species. Within one species, however, the principle of cooperation is supreme; it is, in fact, this very principle that makes survival possible for any species. And, he claimed, this is valid from the simplest species to the *homo sapiens sapiens*.

Not the least because of the disappointment about the allegedly advanced and scientific Western civilisation, which massacred itself during the First World War, did Kropotkin's model of a peaceful and cooperative coexistence become very popular in China. It was relatively easy to tie it to traditional Chinese ideas of the society and furthermore, it also presented itself as based on natural science, and was thus often called the "New Evolution Theory" (*xin jinhualun*).

Though there had been first approaches to practice "huzhu" on a smaller scale previous to Zhou's propagation of *Atarashiki mura*,¹⁴ a formation of a commune had never taken place. *Atarashiki mura* thus spread the message that such a project was, in fact, possible.

Atarashiki mura was met with approval in China but was never put into practice in its pure form. Zhou Zuoren for instance, only did propaganda work. Other advocates as well stayed on the level of propagation or planning at best. Nonetheless, *Atarashiki mura* was in the background of similar projects, of which the most famous one was the "group for mutual help at work and study" (*gongdu huzhutuan*).¹⁵ As the name suggests, "gongdu huzhutuan" was based on the idea of connecting work with study and was not only influenced by the *Atarashiki-mura*-model but also by Kropotkin's guiding principle of "mutual help."¹⁶ The

¹³ See Guo Sheng: "Wusi" *shiqi de gongdu yundong he gongdu sichao* (The movement for work and study and the work-and-study movement ideology during 'May Fourth'), Beijing 1986.

¹⁴ Cf., e.g., Yun Daiying's "huzhutuan" (group for mutual help). See *Wusi shiqi de shetuan* (Associations during the May Fourth Period), 4 volumes, Beijing 1979; vol. 1, pp. 113-210; especially pp.118-122.

¹⁵ See *ibid*, vol.2, pp. 361-496.

¹⁶ See Deng Ye: "Wusi shiqi de gongdu huzhu zhuyi ji qi shijian" (The idea of mutual help at work and study and its implementation during the May Fourth Period). In: *Wen shi zhe* (Literature, History, Philosophy), 1982/6, pp. 21-27.

starting point of this project, which was supported by many influential intellectuals of different backgrounds, was the fact that no capital existed that could be used to acquire land; and furthermore, the interested parties were mostly students who wanted to stay close to their universities to continue their studies. “Gongdu huzhutuan” saw itself as the realisation of a new lifestyle which took place in this case in the city. It neither had a charismatic person whom it was oriented towards nor did it have a detailed programme.¹⁷ As a consequence, it eventually developed in a direction which was not acceptable for some of its first supporters. On the one hand, the group tried to become economically independent immediately, which however failed; and on the other hand it radicalised itself so that many members became alienated. It was, for example, decided to break apart from one’s family, to break off marriages and engagements or even to back out from universities that were perceived as “capitalist institutions.”¹⁸

The project failed after only several months and unleashed a general discussion. This discussion revealed the highly diverse expectations that had been connected with the project, e.g. the variety of very pragmatic expectation of how to finance one’s study (Hu Shi) or more idealistic expectations of how to realise a new lifestyle (Wang Guangqi). Others concluded from the project’s failure that one had to go to the countryside (Li Dazhao) or that one had to take up jobs in capitalistic factories outside the commune (Dai Jitao).¹⁹

Those, who led the discussions on Atarashiki mura and other similar Chinese projects were, without exception, urban intellectuals. In accordance with the Atarashiki mura model, there had also been the attempt to go to the countryside, however, Yun Daiying for instance, connected it with the idea to establish a school in order to perform educational work for the rural population and only do farming as a secondary device. Beyond that, this step was also meant to financially support the already existing bookstore for progressive literature in Wuchang.²⁰ This attempt clearly shows the intellectual and socio-reformist orientation that is

¹⁷ One of the most initiators was Wang Guangqi, who in reality barely had influence. This fact can be proven by the reports of the activist (Shi) Cuntong: “‘Gongdu huzhutuan’ di shiyan he jiaoxun” (The Experiment of “gongdu huzhutuan” and their lessons they learnt). In: *Wusi shiqi de shetuan*: op. cit. (Anm.14), vol. 2, pp. 423-440.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 431-434.

¹⁹ See *Xin qingnian*: op. cit. (note 7), vol. 7/5, April 1, 1920, pp. 1-17.

²⁰ See Yun Daiying: “Weilai zhi meng” (future dream). In: *Wusi shiqi de shetuan*: op. cit. (note 14), vol. 1, pp. 182-197.

different from the ideal of *Atarashiki mura*, which focused on communal life to forge the individual and its personality in a new way by conscious integration of farm work.

Atarashiki mura, which had been “adapted” in China multiple times, also increasingly came under criticism. Hu Shi accused it of escapism and thus “false individualism”. It was said to lack active involvement with social ills. And because of its lifestyle that was oriented towards agriculture and moral self-perfection, it did not fit modern times. Beyond that, the claim that everybody should do farm work, was to him absolutely uneconomical. Hence, he rather pleaded for actively changing concrete areas in society.²¹

The premise of *Atarashiki mura*, which stated that social changes should start with the change of the individual – a view that was shared by many in the beginning – was increasingly questioned after the failure of Chinese projects of alternative lifestyles and in view of the growing social problems in China. More and more people impatiently called for fundamental social changes and regarded these, in turn, as a precondition for the possible functioning of such a “new village”.²²

In consideration of other suggested solutions for a societal change, such as the Russian October Revolution, the hitherto widely shared idea of a peaceful change of society became more and more doubtful. As a consequence, the interest in *Atarashiki mura* and similar activities declined after 1921.

Atarashiki mura versus Xincun

If we compare the (successful) Japanese model with its (unsuccessful) Chinese adaptations, a couple of differences become obvious:

1. *Atarashiki mura* lived and is living from the spiritual reference to its charismatic founder Mushakôji. In China, though Mushakôji was translated and made famous by

²¹ Hu Shi: “Fei geren zhuyi de xin shenghuo” (A non-individual new lifestyle). In *Xinchao*: op. cit. (note 9), vol. 2/3, February 1920, pp. 467-477.

²² See Huang Shaoyu’s critique in *Piping* (Critique), no 5, Dec 26th, 1920. (In: *Wusi shiqi de shetuan*: op. cit. (note 14), vol. 3, pp. 195-197.

Zhou Zuoren (amongst others), Mushakôji texts only played a minor role in the end. A personal bond to him was anyway not existent as in Japan. Zhou himself was no personality to play a similar integrative role in China; probably he did not even want to. In Japan, Mushakôji rather functioned – similar to founders of new religions – mainly as a teacher (*sensei*) and as an idol, whom the members trusted and to whom they declared themselves as loyal. Apart from that, his social status of being an aristocrat probably had some influence as well. De facto, his worship often bordered on the religious. This was of course missing in China.

2. In Japan Mushakôji also financially supported the *Atarashiki mura* project and thus it was him who made it possible to establish it. In China, on the contrary, financial means were lacking to acquire land. Zhou Zuoren, e.g., called that the main obstacle to establish a Chinese commune.²³
3. Because of Mushakôji as the leading figure, *Atarashiki mura* had an uniform ideological basis. In China, on the other hand, the new-village-idea had intermingled with other intellectual trends and was locally as well as personally scattered. The disparate motivations of the activists became a main reason for failure.
4. *Atarashiki mura* was non-political and not very revolutionary in lifestyle. Some groups in China, especially the “*gongdu huzhutuan*”, radicalised and broke with social conventions. Apart from that, they emphasised economic autonomy too strongly and thus their distinction from the framing society. *Atarashiki mura*, instead, accepted financial support from outside and only cautiously drew boundaries to the outside world such as by the common property of capital and goods.
5. While *Atarashiki mura* withdrew itself to a corner of Japan, the “*gongdu huzhutuan*” tried its luck as a urban commune. That way it automatically was economically more dependent and exposed to a much stronger pressure of competition. Without any land property, it had to bear additional costs such as rental charges. Even though in both cases the activists came from the intellectual milieu, the members of *Atarashiki mura* committed to their studies only in the sense of individual reading and not as students of a university. The members of the “*gongdu huzhutuan*”, being university students,

²³ See also his answers to Huang Shaoyu’s objections, *ibid*, pp. 197-199.

inevitably had to face the conflict of a de-facto integration into societal structures vis-à-vis the pursuit of autonomy.

6. While Atarashiki mura defined “work” primarily as field work in the sense of a return of human beings to their nourishing mother nature, in China people did not pay special attention to the type of work. The only goal was to not live at other people’s expense. This, again, clearly emphasises the social aspect of it. In this sense, vis-à-vis the Japanese in-tune-with-nature model stood the “modern”, urban-industrial Chinese practice – a significant contrast to the stage of development of both countries at the time.²⁴
7. Apart from agriculture, the Atarashiki mura ideal encouraged personal cultivation especially in the fields of art and literature. This aesthetic ideal only found little resonance in China. There, the political interest in a method that could change society had priority.
8. The background to this difference was the fundamental different situation of both China and Japan at that time. As Zhou had repeatedly emphasised in his letters to Atarashiki mura, China was facing particularly difficult times.²⁵ The welling-up patriotism during the May Fourth period did not help with the acceptance of the Japanese Atarashiki-mura-project. The intellectuals felt pressured to find a solution to the crisis of a politically unstable country that was endangered in its national integrity. In this sense it was only logical that the Chinese societal “antitheses” in the end also became part of the national modernisation discourse and even tried to dominate it. The Japanese Atarashiki mura, in turn, perceived itself also as “avant-garde”, but in a pure moral sense as a herald for the human race of the future.

Of course, Atarashiki mura also had to face criticism in Japan. The arguments were often the same as those of the Chinese critics.²⁶ Still, the commune was able to survive – despite

²⁴ In this sense, the Japanese Atarashiki-mura-model was a distinct antithesis to its own framing society while the Chinese “adaptions” presented themselves as more conform.

²⁵ A handy summary of Atarashiki-mura-materials on Zhou was published in the August issue of *Atarashiki mura*: op. cit. (note 3), 1992. See pp. 24-25.

²⁶ See for example Arishima Takeo: *Mushakôji-kei e* (To brother Mushakôji). In *Arishima Takeo zenshû* (All works of Arishima Takeo). Tokyo 1980-1982. Vol.7, pp. 206-210; here he considered such a project in the existing capitalist society as an impossibility. Sakai Toshihiko, a leading socialist, regarded Atarashiki mura as a form of anachronism since methods from previous centuries were used in modern times. See his “Atarashiki mura no hihyô” (A critique on Atarashiki mura), in *Chûô kôron* (Central forum), June 1918, pp. 43-48. Ôsugi Sakae criticised Mushakôji that, after all, he accepted the existing social structures. See his “Mushakôji

several problems.²⁷ Probably the most important factor for that was the dominance of Mushakôji's personality and his works, which provided a uniform spiritual basis for Atarashiki mura – comparable to new religious movements in Japan. Furthermore, the Japanese society at large tolerated deviating (non-political) lifestyles more than the Chinese society.²⁸ Because of the unsolved national question, Chinese spokespersons, on the other hand, saw less room for such deviations.

The political unrest in China during the 1920s would have been a constant existential threat for a concrete experiment anyway. Such being the case, though the differences between the Japanese model and its Chinese adaptations were determined by inner factors to a certain degree, the outer ones ultimately might have played an even more crucial role in China.

Saneatsu-shi to atarashiki mura no jigyô” (Mr. Mushakôji Saneatsu and his attempt to establish a new village), in *Shinchô* (New Wave), May 1, 1922, pp. 33-43. The most profound comment was Kawakami Hajime's contribution “Atarashiki mura no keikaku ni tsuite” (On the new village project), in *Kawakami Hajime zenshû* (The Complete Works of Kawakami Hajime), Tokyo 1982, vol. 10, pp. 183-204. He criticised Mushakôji's optimistic view of mankind. – A detailed list of critical texts by Japanese authors can be found in Ôtsuyama Kunio's “Atarashiki mura” no hankyô: Arishima Takeo no hihan o megutte (A response to the new village: On Arishima Takeo's critique), in *Bungaku* (Literature), vol. 42, 1974/10, pp. 48-63. (There: pp. 51-52).

²⁷ Throughout its existence, Atarashiki mura experienced a high fluctuation with inhabitants. In 1926, Mushakôji left the commune but continued to support it. The time during the war was particularly critical; but the commune recovered quickly after the war had ended and experienced a substantial boom in the 1950s.

²⁸ After all, the commune was not put under particular pressure even during the times of militarism.