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Wang Gongbi's Reception and Localization of New Villageism

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Abstract: This paper critically examines the historical reception of "New Villageism" by modern Chinese intellectuals, focusing specifically on its constructive localization through the pioneering practice of Wang Gongbi in Henan Province during the Republican era. Driven by the urgent pursuit of national revitalization and comprehensive rural development, Wang initiated the ambitious "Youth Village" project in Xiaowuying, Xihua County. Grounded deeply in local socio-economic realities, he systematically implemented a constructive localization strategy across three major interconnected dimensions. Politically, the initiative focused on improving grassroots self-governance structures and ensuring community security amidst regional instability. Economically, the project aimed at alleviating the severe financial burdens placed on peasants while simultaneously promoting advanced agricultural production techniques to ensure sustainable livelihoods. Furthermore, in the cultural-educational sphere, Wang dedicated significant efforts to popularizing foundational education and advocating for progressive social customs to eradicate outdated traditions. Although this comprehensive rural experiment was eventually suspended due to the overwhelming macro-historical conflicts and severe social constraints of the era, Wang's enduring endeavors demonstrated the profound dedication and practical wisdom of modern intellectuals seeking structural social reform and educational modernization. Ultimately, this historical analysis offers valuable insights and enduring lessons for contemporary policymakers and scholars exploring sustainable rural development, community empowerment, and effective governance pathways that are authentically suited to specific national conditions and local contexts.

Keywords: rural reconstruction; grassroots governance; popular education; rural revitalization; social reform; localization

1. Mushanokōji Saneatsu and New Villageism

Mushanokōji Saneatsu (1885--1976) was a representative figure of the Shirakaba School during Japan's Taishō period. His literary thought and social practice profoundly embodied the idealistic spirit of Japanese intellectuals in the early twentieth century. Founded in 1910 around the journal Shirakaba ("White Birch"), the Shirakaba School advocated the "dignity of the individual" and emphasized humanitarianism as well as the realization of self-worth. As the spiritual leader of the movement, Mushanokōji sought to reconcile individual freedom with social responsibility through both literature and social action. His ideology of New Villageism not only exerted extensive influence in Japan, but also inspired China's social reform movements during the May Fourth era.

In his early years, Mushanokōji Saneatsu was deeply influenced by Tolstoyan humanitarianism. In particular, Tolstoy's works such as *On Life*, *A Confession*, and *My Religion* had a profound impact on his literary outlook. Tolstoy's agrarian socialism, the ethical and spiritual awakening embodied in *Resurrection*, and his critique of social injustice, private land ownership, and capitalism all strongly shaped Mushanokōji's thought. In April 1910, Mushanokōji, together with his former Gakushūin classmates including Naoya Shiga, Sanetsune Ōgimachi, and Rigen Kinoshita, founded the journal Shirakaba [1]. Between its founding and 1916, the Shirakaba School rapidly reached the height of its influence. Mushanokōji's writings, characterized by explicit moral and religious concerns, provoked extensive discussion within literary circles. He gradually

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integrated literary creation with projects of social reform and thereby embarked upon the practical experiment of the "New Village."

"New Villageism" was a gradualist ideology of social reform initiated by Mushanokōji Saneatsu in the early twentieth century. It sought to establish cooperative "New Villages" outside the existing social order and thereby create a new form of life grounded in egalitarian labor, ultimately realizing an ideal society based on mutual aid and coexistence through peaceful reform. In June 1916, influenced by the Russian October Revolution and contemporary social thought, Mushanokōji convened the first "New Village" gathering in Tokyo. In July 1918, he founded the journal *Atarashiki Mura* ("New Village"), the central publication of the movement, promulgated its regulations, established a membership system, and defined the "New Village" as a community dedicated to equality, freedom, the harmonization of agrarian and artistic life, and the pursuit of authentic human existence.

On 14 November 1918, Mushanokōji formally established the first "New Village" in Ishigōchi, Kijō Village, Koyu District, Miyazaki Prefecture, thereby launching the New Village experiment. Through collective labor, communal ownership of property, and mutual assistance based on equality, he sought to construct an ideal society. The village included both dry fields and rice paddies as well as undeveloped land, and its membership remained at around twenty people [2, 3]. All property belonged collectively to the villagers; social hierarchy and exploitation were rejected. The community operated according to principles of cooperation and mutual aid while emphasizing the harmonious development of both the individual and society. Mushanokōji envisioned a community in which people would live together as equals, like brothers and sisters, combining intellectual and physical labor within an environment shaped by both self-love and love for others, thereby striving toward humanity's collective happiness.

However, this utopian community imbued with idealism soon encountered severe difficulties. Owing to the extensive initial investment, the "New Village" suffered from chronic financial deficits [4]. In order to sustain the project, Mushanokōji and the villagers resorted to various means of fundraising, including literary and artistic production, ticketed performances, advertising, and the sale of calligraphic works. In 1941, the original site of the "New Village" was forced to relocate because of a reservoir construction project in Miyazaki Prefecture. Although Mushanokōji repeatedly negotiated with the authorities, the community ultimately received compensation amounting to less than thirty percent of its original farmland. He later purchased new land in Saitama Prefecture, which gradually became the new center of New Village activities. In the twenty-first century, although the "New Village" secured relatively stable economic resources, it nevertheless continued to face serious challenges such as declining membership and demographic aging.

In his autobiographical novel *A Certain Man*, Mushanokōji wrote that "for him, the desire to engage in literary creation and the desire to create a completely new world probably emerged simultaneously." This statement demonstrates that both literary creation and the construction of an ideal society constituted enduring spiritual aspirations for him. In essence, the "New Village" was a utopian experiment created by a literary intellectual seeking to escape a conflict-ridden world and pursue peace and universal harmony [4, 5]. Yet because it overemphasized moral reform while neglecting structural social transformation, and because it isolated itself excessively from wider society, the "New Village" ultimately failed to avoid collapse.

Nevertheless, Mushanokōji's New Village ideology provided Chinese intellectuals with a new framework for social transformation [6]. During the May Fourth period, largely through the efforts of Zhou Zuoren, Chinese intellectual circles came to acquire a systematic understanding of New Villageism. Intellectuals such as Cai Hesen and Qu Qiubai paid attention to and absorbed aspects of its thought, hoping to realize social reform through New Village-style projects. Among them, Wang Gongbi of Henan Province, an active participant and organizer of the May Fourth Movement, carried out a

seven-year "Youth Village" experiment in his hometown between 1920 and 1927, seeking new paths for rural transformation.

2. The Formation and Influencing Factors of Wang Gongbi's "New Village"

China's disastrous defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894 shattered the Qing dynasty's illusion of being the "Celestial Empire." Against this backdrop, reform-oriented officials of the Self-Strengthening Movement, represented by Zhang Zhidong, began to transcend the ideological framework of "Chinese learning as substance and Western learning for practical use," advocating instead the principle of "taking Japan as teacher." In his *Exhortation to Learning*, Zhang systematically explained the advantages of studying in Japan: compared with the West, Japan was geographically closer, less costly, easier to investigate, linguistically and culturally more accessible, and had already selectively adapted Western learning to East Asian conditions. In Zhang's view, Japan provided Chinese students with a more practical and efficient path for acquiring modern knowledge. In 1896, the Qing government dispatched thirteen students to study in Japan, marking the beginning of modern Chinese overseas education in Japan [7, 8]. Thereafter, the number of Chinese students studying in Japan increased rapidly.

In the summer of 1917, Wang Gongbi, a native of Henan Province, passed the national government-sponsored overseas study examination and went to Waseda University for graduate study in educational sociology. In addition to his formal studies, he pursued social science research at night, focusing particularly on rural education and village self-governance. This academic background profoundly shaped his later experiments in rural autonomy and educational reform. Following the end of the First World War, Japanese society experienced severe social instability and economic crisis, while New Villageism gained considerable popularity. During his stay in Japan, Wang Gongbi became deeply attracted to Mushanokōji Saneatsu's New Village ideology and personally visited Mushanokōji to discuss the theoretical foundations of the movement. Even after Wang returned to China in 1920, the two maintained correspondence, and Mushanokōji frequently mailed copies of the journal *Atarashiki Mura* to him. After returning to China, Wang Gongbi resolutely declined an official appointment offered by the Ministry of Education of the Beiyang Government. Inspired by the ideals of New Villageism and adhering to the conviction that he would "rather struggle in the countryside than seek fame and advancement in the metropolis," he returned to his native village of Xiaowuying in Xihua County, Henan Province. At that time, China was engulfed in warlord conflicts, social disorder, and economic depression in rural areas. Wang personally witnessed villagers being forced to leave their homes in search of livelihoods, while the countryside itself fell into poverty and decay. These realities led him to recognize the severe backwardness of rural development and the imbalance in educational resources between urban and rural society. He believed that if such conditions persisted, they would not only undermine the future of rural China but also hinder the modernization of the nation as a whole.

Through conversations with local villagers, Wang Gongbi discovered that they still retained hope and aspirations for a better future. Although he once criticized Japanese New Villageism as, to some extent, an escape from reality, under the conditions of social turmoil in China it nevertheless provided him with a theoretical framework and practical logic for peacefully transforming rural society. Consequently, Wang gradually developed the conviction that "social reform must begin at the grassroots level." He therefore decided to draw upon Mushanokōji Saneatsu's New Village ideology in order to lead villagers in implementing rural self-governance and establishing a "Youth Village" in his hometown.

However, Wang Gongbi did not mechanically replicate Mushanokōji's New Village model [9]. Instead, he localized and adapted New Villageism in accordance with the realities of Chinese society and the specific conditions of rural Henan. Rather than constructing an isolated utopian community detached from society, Wang aimed to transform the traditional village itself into a new rural community. In doing so, he sought

to explore a path toward rural self-governance suited to China's own historical and social circumstances.

3. The Localization of Rural Self-Governance in Practice

3.1. Political Dimension: Reorganizing Village Governance

In 1920, Wang Gongbi organized and established the "Su Society" (SuShe), which functioned as the central leadership institution of the rural self-governance movement and was primarily responsible for coordinating and promoting rural reform. The name "Su Society" carried a dual meaning. First, the phrase "guarding the clan through simplicity" implied the implementation of village autonomy in Xiaowuying, whereby local residents themselves would manage village affairs, thus expressing resistance to official bureaucratic control and emphasizing self-governance [10]. Second, the character su ("simplicity" or "plainness") possessed strong Confucian connotations, indicating that the organization aimed to guide the transformation of rural society through Confucian ethics and educational ideals. The declared objective of the Su Society was to transform the Youth Village into an ideal rural community in which "everyone labors, every household possesses land, both rich and poor have food to eat, and men and women enjoy equal rights." Its discussions focused primarily on social and educational issues. In terms of social governance, it drew theoretical inspiration from Sun Yat-sen's concept of local self-government, while in education it emphasized Confucian ideals such as "education without discrimination" and "the world belongs to all." In addition, the Su Society published the journal *Green Fields*, which served as an important platform for intellectual exchange and written discussion among its members.

At the same time, Wang Gongbi reorganized the preexisting administrative structure of the village. Previously, Xiaowuying functioned as the central village governing several surrounding settlements. Following a process of reorganization and consultation with villagers, nearby villages within a radius of approximately three li—including Zhuanqiao, Lengfandian, Sanliqiao, and Tanzhuang—were merged into a newly organized autonomous community, while Xiaowuying remained the central settlement. Under the new governance system, a village administrative office was established through democratic elections, along with the positions of village head and deputy village head [11]. A mediation committee was also created to manage village affairs and resolve local disputes.

In order to ensure the effective implementation of rural self-governance, Wang Gongbi also organized a local militia known as the "Defense Corps," replacing the former household guard units. The Defense Corps consisted of more than forty members, most of whom were young peasants from lower- and middle-income backgrounds, armed primarily with simple weapons such as spears and blades. The organization not only served as a security force protecting the village, but also acted as a core force in implementing the village construction program. The Defense Corps participated repeatedly in defending the village and rescuing residents, and even assisted troops under Feng Yuxiang. Over time, the organization significantly improved local public security and helped safeguard villagers' lives and property.

3.2. Economic Dimension: Reforming Production and Implementing Rent and Interest Reduction

In 1921, Wang Gongbi implemented policies of rent and interest reduction in the Youth Village in an effort to improve the livelihood of poor peasants and alleviate social tensions. Land rents were substantially reduced: rents for high-, medium-, and low-quality land were lowered respectively from 105 jin, 70 jin, and 52.5 jin of grain to 70 jin, 50 jin, and 40 jin, while harvest-sharing arrangements were adjusted accordingly. At the same time, private lending interest rates were strictly regulated. Loans that had previously carried monthly interest rates as high as three percent were now restricted to a maximum annual rate of two percent. These measures effectively curbed the expansion of landlord and wealthy peasant interests while substantially reducing the economic burden on poor peasants. Subsequently, the Youth Village introduced a graduated system

of public fee collection based on the amount of land owned by each household. Families possessing less than one and a half mu of land per capita were exempted from various communal expenses, including those related to security, irrigation, welfare, and education. In addition, the village supported poor peasants through interest-free loans, subsidies for renting land, and grain relief programs.

Under this institutional arrangement, landlords gradually realized that holding excessive amounts of land was no longer economically advantageous and were therefore compelled to relinquish part of their holdings [12]. Poor peasants, in turn, gained increased access to farmland and productive resources. As a result, the gap between rich and poor was reduced to some extent, while the productive enthusiasm of poor peasants was stimulated, thereby easing class tensions within rural society.

3.3. Cultural Dimension: Establishing the Youth Public School

On 9 October 1920, in order to reverse the stagnation of education in the Youth Village, Wang Gongbi formally established the "Youth Public School" on the foundation of the Chongshi Primary School founded by his father. Centered upon the principles of "labor and health" and dedicated to the implementation of humanistic education, the school sought to promote the comprehensive transformation of rural society through education. In its initial stage, however, the institution faced severe limitations in both scale and teaching resources. It consisted of only three classes, approximately 140 students, and six teachers [13]. It was only after several years of development that the school gradually expanded in size and influence.

At its founding, the Youth Public School established both a primary education division and a supplementary education division for peasants, comprising seven grade levels and five classes in total. Tuition fees were entirely waived for all students. In addition, the school provided special subsidies for poor peasant students and female students in order to ensure educational access for disadvantaged groups. In terms of educational structure, the lower primary and peasant supplementary classes adopted a multi-grade teaching method, while the upper primary division gradually implemented a "dual-track system" combining vocational education and preparatory academic education. Unlike the rigid dual-track system found in Germany, however, the model adopted by the Youth Public School was highly flexible and could be adjusted according to students' developmental needs.

Financially, the Youth Public School relied primarily upon income from school-owned farmland, local government subsidies, and limited tuition payments from students. At the time of the school's establishment, Wang Gongbi personally donated more than thirty mu of farmland, four thousand jin of grain, and three hundred yuan in cash, while also pledging to contribute his salary for five consecutive years. Furthermore, he donated the entirety of his salary earned during his tenure as county education director, together with his family property and more than one thousand books from his personal library. He also persuaded local landlords to donate land and housing plots in support of the school's development. In 1924, an article entitled "Introducing the Youth Public School" published in the supplement of the Morning Post documented the school's financial conditions in detail, including revenue from rented school farmland, subsidies from county and district governments, and tuition income. Although the school operated under severe financial constraints, Wang Gongbi consistently insisted on minimizing tuition fees in order to reduce the educational burden on impoverished families. The Youth Public School not only fulfilled educational functions, but also became a significant force for cultural transformation in rural society. Wang Gongbi actively advocated gender equality in education by recruiting female students locally and enabling them to receive scientific and cultural education alongside male students. He also implemented compulsory education within the Youth Village, requiring all school-age children, regardless of gender, to attend school and explicitly opposing gender discrimination [14].

At the same time, Wang Gongbi led teachers and students in campaigns aimed at eliminating feudal customs and superstitious practices [5, 14]. During holidays, festivals,

and extracurricular activities, he traveled to surrounding villages to advocate anti-superstition and anti-feudal ideas, while promoting social reforms such as cutting queues, ending foot-binding, and encouraging education. Whenever traditional opera performances were held locally, Wang frequently delivered public speeches advocating anti-imperialist and anti-feudal ideas, while students carried out activities such as cutting queues and persuading women to abandon foot-binding practices. These reform campaigns later evolved into movements aimed at "destroying temples and overthrowing idols." Students carried red flags and tools as they dismantled local temples and religious statues, symbolically expressing resistance against feudal superstition and traditional authority. Although such radical actions reflected the historical limitations of the era, they also demonstrated the strong desire among May Fourth intellectuals to transform rural society through educational and cultural movements.

4. Conclusion

Although the Youth Village and the Youth Public School achieved remarkable results in the fields of rural self-governance, educational reform, and social transformation, the experiment ultimately failed to escape collapse. In September 1926, more than two thousand bandits and defeated soldiers launched a sudden attack on the Youth Village, burning down over two hundred residential houses and school buildings and causing incalculable losses to the autonomous rural community. Exhausted both physically and mentally after years of dedication to rural reconstruction, Wang Gongbi was eventually forced to leave the village and accept a teaching position at Henan University, thereby bringing the seven-year experiment in rural self-governance to an end. This "New Village," born upon the deeply rooted foundation of thousands of years of feudal tradition and within the context of a fragile socio-economic structure, seemed ultimately unable to escape the fate of failure. Nevertheless, it possessed profound historical significance. As later commentators observed, "In the storm-ridden old China, and in the war-torn province of Henan, the existence of such a village was nothing short of a miracle. The name of the Youth Village and the life within it inspired countless patriots and intellectuals concerned for the nation and its people." Wang Gongbi's New Village thought and the construction of the Youth Village provided an important point of reference for subsequent reforms in rural self-governance, while both the educational methods and educational philosophy of the Youth Public School also offer valuable insights for contemporary reforms of China's educational system.

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