

# Whatever Happened to Yamagishi? Idealism, Nature and the Environment in Japan's Cooperative Agrarian Community

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### Meet Yamagishi



Living quarters at the main Yamagishi Toyosato in Mie prefecture

The main task of Ikuhara Hideyuki's full-time job is feeding the pigs at Yamagishi. However, he gets no salary for his efforts. In fact, he quit his job developing hi-tech industry developing hi-vision televisions and gave up all his possessions for this lifestyle—and he couldn't be happier.



Hideyuki Ikuhara quit his hi-tech job to be an unpaid pig farmer at Yamagishi

Welcome to Yamagishi, Japan's most famous commune, in Toyosato, Mie Prefecture. The Yamagishi quest for happiness takes place in rural communities called jikkenchi—roughly meaning “a place to realize (Yamagishi) principles”—where people live with a decidedly anti-capitalist twist: no money and minimal possessions.



**Seto Chinami, Yamagishi food preparer, believes Yamagishism leads to true happiness**

“When I was a high school student, a teacher talked about alternative societies, based on true communism,” explained Seto Chinami, who prepares food at Yamagishi. “Years later I remembered his talk when I met a Yamagishi vendor. Impressed that people were putting their ideals into action, I gave Yamagishi a try.” Despite the fact that it eventually led to separation from her husband, she stayed on, and still believes that the Yamagishi way leads to true happiness.

#### Yamagishi History

In 1956 the founder Yamagishi Miyozo and original members pooled all their personal assets with the hope of realizing a spiritually superior society where members could attain happiness and change society. From the start their vision was an amalgam of organic agriculture, socialism, egalitarianism, and spirituality without religion. Inspiration came to Yamagishi the founder in the unlikeliest of places.

“Yamagishi had been a rebellious youth and under surveillance by the wartime Imperial secret police,” Ernest Callenbach writes. “On the run, he took refuge in a chicken house, where he passed the time observing what made chickens happy.” [1]

Members believe agricultural work and a

simple lifestyle supported by other community members will satisfy all their needs, including financial needs. Indeed, if members are sick, Yamagishi pays the medical bills; if members wish to purchase something, and others agree, they purchase it. Yamagishi will even pay university tuitions—if the members agree.

Egalitarianism, as opposed to authoritarianism, is a major tenet of the Yamagishi movement. There are no bosses. Rather, each jikkenchi elects a number of new committee members. Disputes are settled by consensus. Ikuhara told of a recent problem with others on the pig farming team.

“One man had written a two week holiday on the calendar over New Year’s. The next day a coworker expressed his dissatisfaction. Shouldn’t he have consulted with us before claiming such a lengthy holiday? We agreed, so tomorrow we’ll go to speak with him about this matter.”

As one might imagine about a group living so counter to the dominant culture’s materialistic ways, their practices and philosophy have invited criticism over the years, and worse.

#### The Turbulent 1990s

Joining Yamagishi takes an enormous leap of faith. Still today, when members join they “invest” in the community, effectually forfeiting their personal assets. Yamagishi is, after all, a possession-less society. According to Katayama Hiroko, a Yamagishi spokeswoman, the amount they “invest” is determined through consultation, taking the new member’s life circumstances into consideration. Some may keep half their assets. Others may simply understate their assets; Yamagishi conducts no search of financial records. Under these circumstances a woman who later quit and sued Yamagishi “invested” a whopping 250,000,000 yen.

The litigant claimed she was brainwashed during Yamagishi's training sessions. Yamagishi offers an eight day course open to the public called Tokkoh. During the session, which has no teacher, participants "share their ideology, worldview, and wisdom in order to investigate the best way to live," according to Yamagishi promotional material. For those who complete that course and are seriously considering joining, there is a two week Kensan seminar which is more experiential than discussion-based.

Yamagishi actually rejected the litigant—twice—and finally accepted her onto a jikkenchi after her assurances that she believed in Yamagishi principles; she had originally cited struggles with her daughter as a reason for wanting to join.

In court, her claim that she was brainwashed was rejected, but she still won a settlement. Despite having signed a contract that released her claims to her assets, the court ordered Yamagishi to return approximately 50% of her original investment. She also claimed her disillusionment stemmed from the "extravagant" lifestyles of the Yamagishi leaders, which the court rejected as well, according to Katayama.

Katayama also rejects the notion that Yamagishi leaders live luxurious lifestyles and points out that they routinely return a portion of the "investment" to those who want to leave the jikkenchi, and even pay off the debts of new members who are broke. Thus, they don't view the court's ruling as a defeat.

For much of the 1990s Yamagishi had to deal with similar lawsuits brought about by a total of 31 disillusioned ex-members who, after quitting, demanded their money back. All litigants received some return of their original "investment," with the average being 50%. The court cases dragged on for years hurting recruitment and its country-wide image.

The Yamagishi image has probably always been suspect in the eyes of the average Japanese. In the mid to late 1990s the mass media, and television specials in particular, highlighted perceived flaws in their child-raising methods. Kids would work in fields to gain experience with agriculture then head to a local public school—often without breakfast due to Yamagishi's policy of eating only lunch and dinner. The fact that some kids got hungry before their 1pm school lunch, and others fell asleep, brought sharp criticism from mainstream society.

"Yamagishi is always looking for the best way to do things," Sakai Kazuki an educator at Yamagishi explained, "and we frequently amend our practices. In that case there were some legitimate flaws in our approach, which we've corrected. Kids now only occasionally work in the fields, and we make sure they eat breakfast if they need to." Sakai added that it's ironic that now local schools bring local kids to Yamagishi to experience farm life while Yamagishi children have no set farming chores.

At least some of the criticism seems to spill into sensationalism, or vindictiveness. In a February 1, 2001 Japan Times article the headline blares, "Commune ordered to return 'brainwashed' woman's cash" [2] -yet Katayama emphasizes that the court rejected the claim she was brainwashed in any way. Katayama also denies that the court upheld her "realization" that she "was simply a source of money and free labor," as the article states. The article also fails to point out that Yamagishi rejected the woman twice, which sheds considerable doubt on the implication that they just wanted to get her money.

## Raising Children





**Yamagishi youth give a spirited taiko drumming performance**

Even though Yamagishi has abolished farm chores for children, they still highly value experiential learning. A basic policy is “not to teach or bring up, but to learn or grow by students themselves.” Living on farmland and among farm animals gives children the foundation they need, it is believed.

Like their views of money and possessions, some ideas related to raising children are unorthodox by Japanese, and indeed, most other standards. When kids turn ten years old they generally move out of their parents’ apartment on the jikkenchi and into a dormitory with other Yamagishi kids. Parents maintain intimate ties, but from then on children are more a part of the community than an individual family. Boarding schools in Britain might work in a similar way, but children are still thought to primarily belong to the family rather than the school community. At

Yamagishi, rather than direct parental authority, “all the adults are responsible for seeing to the welfare and safety of the children.” [3] Rather than idyllic, the results are, like the results of mainstream society, mixed.

“My three kids, who are now all grown, are all choosing to live in Tokyo rather than the jikkenchi,” Ikuhara confided. When asked whether he thought they had regrets or misgivings about their Yamagishi upbringing, he figured they did. “But they laugh about it. I think their feeling has less to do with being at Yamagishi and more to do with being children. Isn’t it common for kids to have misgivings as well as positive memories? I know I do about my childhood.”

Indeed, John Small writing for *Kansai Time Out* magazine observed, “At the Kumamoto Jikkenchi, one of the smaller communities with about 60 members, the children played with a lively curiosity showing an impressive degree of knowledge of the natural world.” [4] At the Mie jikkenchi the youth were respectful and active in various clubs including taiko, Japanese drumming.

### **Working at Yamagishi**

Living with much fainter forces of parental authority is not the only way Yamagishi members live a more communal than authoritarian lifestyle. At the workplace there is no hierarchy to speak of. Rather, decisions are made after discussion via the “Yamagishi process”: proposal to dialog to discussion to agreement to reexamination. It took Ikuhara a while to make the adjustment from his job in the hi-tech industry to Yamagishi.

“The only negative point I’ve experienced since coming here,” he explained, “was overwork when I first arrived.” There was no boss or set working hours, he went on to explain, so he had to learn to work in harmony with his needs and

the community's. Since then he's learned to rest when tired—a revolutionary idea for Japan's overworked.

Seto, who is presently in charge of food preparation, emphasized consultation. "It's my job to consult with cooks and others before deciding the menu." While group consensus may be the preferred decision making method for all Japanese, at Yamagishi, it rules.

Yamagishi hires a number of outsiders to do agricultural work. At Toyosato alone, the main jikkenchi in Mie prefecture, some 140 outside laborers are employed. Of those, 22 are foreigners. The jobs, which pay 1,000 yen per hour for both Japanese and foreign laborers, have attracted a Brazilian-Japanese labor force, which generally perceives it as preferable to factory work (which has bosses who can be demanding if not petty). Produce, which is mostly organic, is distributed throughout Japan. Eggs are the main Yamagishi product. Some of it is quite upscale, like the cherry tomatoes which fetch a handsome price in Japan's trendy supermarket sections.



**Pounding rice into mochi at Yamagishi**

## Yamagishi and the Environment



**Yamagishi feed for farm animals with discarded food like strawberry "Pocky" snacks shown here**

Yamagishi is often compared to the Israeli kibbutz, or the "back to earth" communal movements of the 1960s. Each Yamagishi jikkenchi is an ecologically sound alternative to a materialistic society: Yamagishi produce is mostly organic; waste water is combined with pig urine to treat seedlings; recycling is maximized while consumerism minimized.

"We take the straw leftover from the rice harvest and feed the cows," Naruse Yukishige, a rice farmer at Yamagishi said. "Then the manure becomes fertilizer for the rice fields. And we're always looking for ways to refine the process."

Callenbach, the author of ecological science fiction novels *Ecotopia* and *Ecotopia Emerging*, highly praised Yamagishi's environmentalism after visiting the Mie jikkenchi and writing about them for *Communities* magazine.

“Yamagishism thus may be only a small, bright, improbable lighthouse, shining out from a rocky coast on which our industrial society is about to go aground,” he wrote. “Still, it demonstrates that an equalitarian, secular, democratic social order is possible, and sustainable ecologically, and it thus deserves to be studied very carefully.” [5] His only criticism stemmed from Yamagishi’s reliance on fossil fuels, especially for driving. “I was shocked,” he wrote, “to see a parking area with about 50 vehicles, and people use them quite a lot.” [6]

Despite living a virtual zero-waste ecological ideal, environmentalism is not a tenet and members seem to steer clear of any ‘save the earth’ sort of discussion. Rather, the application of scientific principles in the quest for happiness is the core ideal, and living in harmony with the environment happens to satisfy that ideal.

### Science and Spirituality

Yamagishi Miyozo always advised members to make religion “purely a personal matter.” A Yamagishi brochure states, “It is possible to change ways of thought without reliance upon God or Buddha. It is possible to do so scientifically, utilizing the capabilities of the human mind alone.”

A manifestation of that philosophy is the aforementioned “Yamagishi process,” which relies on observation and consensus. A rigorous questioning of what is right and true permeates the jikkenchi. This scientific approach to every aspect of life attracted Nagase Kunio some 33 years ago. “Here we strive to figure what’s real, and what’s the best way of doing things,” he said, adding that personal happiness will lead to societal happiness.

Given Yamagishi’s dedication to scientific principles, it’s ironic that another common criticism Japanese lay on Yamagishi is that the communities are too religious. There are in fact

no religious teachings or practices, either from the founder or from established religions. Their idealism, however, does have a spiritual flavor. The aim to realize a happiness that can spread throughout humanity certainly implies a moral foundation. And alcohol and tobacco, while allowed, seem relegated to relative obscurity.

“Religion/Spirituality is and isn’t related,” longtime member Miyachi Masayuki said. “We want to change society. We want everyone to realize happiness.” This is, of course, the ultimate aim of Buddhism and other religions, but the means is a possessionless community of individuals practicing sustainable agriculture rather than ritual or prescribed spiritual practices.

### Yamagishi Globally

Several jikkenchi exist overseas in Korea, Thailand, Switzerland, Australia and the United States. In particular, Katayama spoke of the success of the Korea-based Yamagishi which includes a number of Korean members. In contrast, members of the Yamagishi in Thailand and the U.S. are all Japan-born, and the jikkenchi are extremely small. “Many Thai like to work and live on the jikkenchi, but they are not actually members,” Katayama said.

By commune standards, Yamagishi’s 50 years of existence is an admirable achievement, probably second longest in Japan after “Atarashiki-mura” (New Village) in Miyazaki prefecture, which opened in 1918.

While Toyosato in Mie prefecture is by far the largest jikkenchi, with over 400 members, some 32 other jikkenchi exist all over Japan with approximately 800 other members. In addition, Yamagishi sponsors a “Children’s Paradise Village” three times a year. It’s promoted as giving kids the chance to “get together as one-body” and draw out their natural abilities. Over 300 children from outside, along with over 100 Yamagishi children, participated last year to

experience nature and develop relationships by communal living.

However, several jikkenchi have closed in recent years and the number of total members decreased during the lawsuit years. Is that indicative of the beginning of the end for Yamagishi? “Certainly not,” Nagase declared. “New members will start coming again. I’m sure of it.”

For more details about the eight day Tokkoh course , Children’s Paradise Village, or Yamagishi in general, contact Ms. Hiroko Katayama in English or Japanese at [katayama\\_h@mula-net.com](mailto:katayama_h@mula-net.com).

## Notes

[1] Ernest Callenbach (2006). “Ecotopia in Japan?” *Communities*, #132, Fall 2006, p. 44.

[2] [Japan Times](#) (2001).

[3] [Kansai Time Out](#) (1999).

[4] *ibid*

[5] Ernest Callenbach (2006). “Ecotopia in Japan?” *Communities*, #132, Fall 2006, p. 45.

[6] *ibid*

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