1952

As the Chinese Communist Party attempted to rein in labour unrest and navigate its already fraught relationship with the trade unions, it also had to live up to the expectations it had aroused in the working class. Given the chronic lack of affordable dwellings in the largest urban centres where China's industrial base was concentrated, construction of public housing became a priority. As this essay will show, Shanghai was particularly innovative in providing new solutions to the housing crisis. It is no mystery that twentieth-century state socialism in both the Soviet Union and China embraced the idea that ideology was embedded in material infrastructure. However, the origins of Shanghai's showcase for socialist living, the Caoyang New Village, came from the unlikely sources of the utopian socialist New Village movement in Japan and US neighbourhood unit planning. Although it did not solve Shanghai's housing shortage, this was nevertheless an important experiment in form, and now has become a historical landmark where migrant workers (the twenty-first century proletariat) lease the cramped dwellings amid the glittering towers of the city.

Housing the New Socialist Worker: The 'Workers' New Village' in Shanghai

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When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took control of Shanghai in May 1949, an acute housing shortage loomed large as an obstacle to bringing socialism to China's most capitalist city. Some one million working-class households (four to five million residents) lived in 'dilapidated housing' found in the older *lilong* (旧式里弄), the lane-alley neighbourhoods that were home to the majority of Shanghai's population, and in shack settlements (棚户区) of rural migrants. The promise of the new socialist government was to replace these and other legacies of capitalist Shanghai with a new form of housing that in function and design represented the new era. A new socialist housing model was central to fulfilling this promise: the Workers' New Village (工人新村).

Construction of the first of what would become nine Workers' New Villages located around the outskirts of Shanghai started in September 1951 under the orders of Vice-Mayor Pan Hannian, who headed the municipal government's Worker Housing Construction Committee. The first Workers' New Village was completed quickly, in May 1952, and named Caoyang New Village (曹杨新村), Village Number One (after the nearby Caoyang Road). It was located near the main industrial zone in western Shanghai, in Putuo District, on land appropriated from Dongmiao village in Zhenru township (真如镇东庙前村).[1] The two-storey masonry and wood-beam buildings—48 units aligned in staggered rows—provided new housing for model workers and 'progressive producers' (先进生产者) from nearby factories. As additional units were completed, by 1953, there were 1,002 households in the Caoyang New Village complex, which was thus renamed the '1,002 Households Project' by the urban planning bureaucracy. Soon the Shanghai Municipal Government would receive permission from Beijing to embark on the '20,000 Households Project' (两万户) to build Workers' New Villages in Yangpu, Zhabei, and elsewhere in Putuo District.

Workers' New Villages would, in the end, house only a fraction of Shanghai's one million working-class households—and Shanghai's well-known housing scarcity under state socialism remained no better than it had been under the capitalism of the pre-1949 era.[2] But the significance of the projects lay less in housing policy than in the symbolic and political realms. This essay will analyse the Caoyang New Village as a material representation of Chinese socialism in 'post-capitalist' Shanghai. Labour history, in China and elsewhere, has paid close attention to the material culture and lived experience of workers. Housing is central to both. Although in most accounts of labour in Maoist China the lived experience of the 'work unit'—including factory housing—has been the central focus, the significance of Workers' New Villages (which were built not only in Shanghai, but also in Beijing and other first-tier cities) has received less attention.

The 'Village' in Workers' New Village

Scholars have traced the ideological origins of the 'new village' (新村) and its implications for the design and layout of Caoyang New Village to two sources: utopian socialist thought of the early twentieth century and the urban planning concept of the 'neighbourhood unit' (in Chinese, 邻里单位) informed by British and American designers in the 1920s.

According to Chinese urbanists' recent scholarship on Caoyang New Village, the 'new village' concept stems from the new village ideology (新村主义) of the iconoclastic 'White Birch School' (*Shirakaba-ha*) in early twentieth-century Japan, an artistic movement that rejected old tenets of Japanese philosophical thought in favour of individualism and humanism, as espoused by Leo Tolstoy.[3] The ideal society, in the view of literary figures such as Saneatsu Mushanokōji, would be one in which mutual aid and labour existed alongside the pursuit of artistic endeavours. Mushanokōji established the 'New Village' (Atarashiki Mura) as a social experiment, where peasants and artists engaged in mutual labour and shared in the output of the collective. The new village concept migrated from Japan to China by way of Zhou Zuoren, a literary figure and Japanophile more famous today as the younger brother of Lu Xun. In October 1919, Zhou published an essay in the New Culture Movement journal *New Tide* (新潮) reporting on his visit to Atarashiki Mura, heaping praise on the deeper meanings and social connectedness of arduous physical labour and

mutual support. In enthusiastic tones similar to those in which foreign visitors would later speak of Caoyang New Village, Zhou proclaimed: '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!'[4]

Zhou never attempted to establish a 'new village' in China, but the practices of mutual aid, work–study collectives, and communal living were popular throughout the 1910s and 1920s among Chinese students and intellectuals. What was later labelled as 'utopian socialism' (乌托邦社会主义) drew the attention of the youthful Mao Zedong and others at the time of the May Fourth Movement.[5] The new village ethos resonated with the idea, later propagated in Maoism, of the integration of manual and mental labour, and the assimilation of the village and the city—not in terms of the urbanisation of the village, but in terms of the 'village-isation' of the (industrial) city. As Yang Chen has written: 'The creation of the Workers' New Village became the most important spatial realization of the socialist era in Shanghai.'[6]

Capitalist Origins of a Socialist Village

If the Workers' New Village was the spatial manifestation of early Marxist and Maoist thought in China and represented the essence of socialism in Shanghai, it was also derived from a significantly different line of socialist practice of Western origin. The lead designer of Caoyang New Village was the Chief Engineer and Deputy Director of the Shanghai Municipal Urban Planning and Management Bureau, Wang Dingzeng, who received an MA in Architecture in the 1930s from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Wang explicitly drew on the urban planning concept of the 'neighbourhood unit'—a popular ideal in architecture and planning attributed to the New York City urban planner Clarence Perry.[7] Perry, who heavily influenced regional planning in that city in the late 1920s and 1930s, believed that clusters of housing should be arranged around a core of public institutions, including schools, churches, libraries, and post offices, with green spaces and small shops situated throughout the surrounding half-mile radius of the residential cluster. The neighbourhood unit, which could be designed adjacent to arterial roads but not disrupted by their traffic, would promote community at a time when the automobile and urban highways were destroying traditional neighbourhoods in New

York City. Perry's ideas held sway among urban planning programs of the sort that Wang Dingzeng attended at the University of Illinois, and in an interview late in his long life, Wang recounted the fact that many planners and architects returning to China from training in Europe and the United States had been influenced by the neighbourhood unit design concept:

> Of course, at the time [the 1950s], I didn't dare to say that it was European and American style. We had to learn from the big brother Soviet Union. In subsequent construction [at Caoyang New Village], we also added the former Soviet Union's residential architectural pattern and created a series of long blocks in the style of farmhouses [农庄式].[8]

The curious intellectual origins attributed to Caoyang New Village—in some ways both contradictory and complementary as alternatives to the mode of housing provision found in the capitalist West—would become a source of controversy only a few years after the completion of Village Number One in 1952. After urban planning, and economic planning more broadly, came under the sway of Soviet influences in the early 1950s, the spatial plans and generous open spaces in Caoyang New Village would stand out as flagrant violations of the Stalinist principle of high housing density.[9]

On a visit to Shanghai in 1953, a Soviet specialist was quoted as saying of Caoyang New Village:

> In recent years, many left-leaning architects have built some boring barracks-style square-box houses, and have created a so-called theory that streets are only for traffic, merely vessels of transportation, so there is no need to pay attention to street construction as an art form. As can often be seen, the housing units whose sides front the road cause the street to be rigid and boring.[10]

This criticism was quoted in a 1956 article in *Architecture Journal* (建筑学报), authored by none other than the chief designer of Caoyang New Village, Wang Dingzeng. In print at least, Wang acknowledged that his team had moved too hastily, with no consideration for the aesthetics of the street when placing the windowless sides of the housing units facing the road. Far more serious, as Wang wrote in the same article, was the paradoxical effect of creating in Caoyang New Village overly high densities

within the two and three-storey housing units (about the same citywide four square metres per person), while the neighbourhood itself consumed valuable land with its winding streets, rows of willow trees, and meandering stream (which had once been a polluted, mosquito-infested brook). Wang also confessed to another major oversight in putting the buildings too close together, blocking sunlight for most rooms on the ground floor.[11]

These and other shortcomings, Wang concluded, were the result of failing to study the Soviet experience, but also showed the errors made when a major housing construction project is undertaken without first developing a comprehensive urban plan.[12] Caoyang New Village was built before urban planners had completed their work, and the results showed. If Shanghai were ever to grow out to its western reaches, Wang (accurately) surmised, the squat structures of Caoyang New Village would be pinched in amid a very different-looking city.[13] Subsequent housing units—village numbers two through nine—built in Caoyang New Village over the 1950s and 1960s would have six-storey rather than two-storey construction, and would provide more space between buildings. And, of course, the skyscrapers and towering apartment buildings of Shanghai would come to engulf Caoyang New Village by the late twentieth century.

Caoyang New Village as a Socialist Space

Despite its non-socialist origins and the criticism its designers came under in the 1950s, Caoyang New Village was soon celebrated as the shining symbol of Shanghai under state socialism, a material expression of the leading status of the working class. As most media descriptions note, Caoyang New Village was visited by some 7,200 foreign delegations from 155 countries over six decades, with former US president Jimmy Carter a commonly cited guest (he visited Caoyang New Village in the spring of 1981, soon after stepping down as US president, and then again in 1987).

Despite its origins with a New York regional planner and its adoption in the early 1950s by way of Wang and other US-trained architects, the neighbourhood unit connected well with the socialist collective ethos and urban management aspirations of the CCP. As several studies have noted, the neighbourhood unit concept, as a kind of cellular form of community services and governance, is not a radical departure from the Street Committees (街道委员会) and subordinate Residents' Committees (居委会) that the CCP overlaid on the existing neighbourhoods in Shanghai and all other cities in China during the 1950s.[14] Perry and

the propagators of this idea never intended neighbourhood units to be aggregated into large administrative units like a Street Committee, nor to mobilise residents for political purposes and ideological work, but this type of cellular spatial formation clearly facilitated the CCP's aspirations.

Unfortunately, there is a scarcity of contemporaneous research material on what life was like inside Caoyang New Village Number One and in its subsequent extensions during the 1950s. Recollections of workers several decades later, found in media reports and journal articles, generally convey a sense of emancipatory personal experiences (翻身) from the impoverished living conditions in the 1940s to the simple but satisfactory dwellings in Caoyang New Village. Reports also note that the model workers and progressive producers who first moved into Caoyang New Village were allocated housing units so that workers from the same factory would be living on the same floor, or at least in the same building.[15] Shanghai's first twenty-four-hour bus service operated to take workers between Caoyang New Village and their factories, covering both the day and the night shifts.[16] By these retrospective accounts, the most significant effect of the Caoyang New Village was in the moulding of a collective consciousness through a shared material and lived experience. As Luo Gang, a scholar of twentieth-century Chinese literature and culture, notes: 'The significance of the New Workers' Villages thus lay not only in the functional value of actual living space. Even more important was that it signalled the arrival of a new working-class spatial regime, a production of a new space in the social imaginary.'[17]

Luo and others have analysed Caoyang New Village from the perspective of Henri Lefebvre's work on space, ideology, and power. As Lefebvre famously said: 'Space is political and ideological. It is a product literally filled with ideologies.'[18] If Caoyang New Village, by its layout, arrangement of public space, and provision of public services, was the material representation of the New China, and signalled the status of workers as the leading class in socialist China, it is with deep irony that the place had the look of an American suburban tract of housing units (though multi-family rather than single-family), with winding streets, sidewalks, surrounded by green space, and even a gentle stream flowing nearby. Chinese socialism was being produced spatially from an oddly mid-twentieth–century American ideal, thanks to the lineage of Clarence Perry and Wang Dingzeng. The novelist Zhou Erfu in his classic *Morning in Shanghai* (上海早晨) depicted Caoyang New Village Number One as follows:

> The setting sun had turned half the sky red, giving the row of willows behind the houses a purple glow. Parallel to their house were rows of new two-story houses, a broad alley between them, and opposite the glass windows were, as with their house, a row of willows … As everyone walked out of the school, the dusk gathered from all directions, and the houses, the willows, and the lawns seemed to melt, faintly and indistinctly, into the dusk. Only the stream next to the road flashed and glittered faintly. People's flickering shadows flitted by. In the New Village, only at the Cooperative were the lights bright and the voices loud.[19]

Morning in Shanghai (published in four volumes between 1958 and 1960) celebrated the agency of the new working class and their efforts to protect socialist China from the ruses of Shanghai's old capitalist classes. However, Caoyang New Village Number One and its extensions would end up becoming the exception, as other housing built in the city was done in Soviet-style concrete-exterior apartment blocks—a representation, in Lefebvre's framework, of a very different form of socialism, reflecting the power of five-year plans and the productivist imperative.

The Decline of Caoyang New Village

Caoyang New Village's distinctive traits lay in part with Western influences, and in part with a collectivist ethos reflecting the self-sufficiency of the early twentieth-century's New Village movement in Asia. Within the community were public spaces and public goods provision: schools, libraries, public baths, hotwater stoves, vegetable gardens, consumer cooperatives, medical clinics, auditoriums, and administrative departments for housing management and public security. During the 1950s, land was laid aside for future construction of banks, post offices, childcare centres, parks, what would become the famous Cultural Palace (established in 1953), and a movie theatre (established in 1960).[20] In keeping with Clarence Perry's intention in his neighbourhood unit designs, all these amenities at Caoyang New Village were placed within walking distance of the residents.

By the late 1950s, as Caoyang New Village grew from forty-eight two-storey buildings to 718 buildings of two to six storeys, overcrowding

became a serious issue. A 1958 report from the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee noted that the low-density principles with which the community had been designed were now anything but. While the public space and amenities were plentiful, within the housing units, the workers lived in ever-closer quarters.[21] The specific numbers provided by the authors stated that, from a base of 929 households (4,247 residents) in 1952, the community had expanded to 8,584 households (47,563 residents) in 1958. Given that there were 680 buildings at that point, they should have accommodated the expansion, but the typical two-storey construction held only ten rooms. There were fifty cases in which two households shared the same room—the largest space for which was only 32.9 square metres. Crowding led to inevitable arguments and disputes among the residents. The original arrangement was for ground-floor shared kitchens to be used by five households, and toilets to be shared by the ten households in the building.[22] Subsequent construction at other Workers' New Villages in Shanghai after 1954 used improved standards in construction and had three or more storeys. They also had south-facing rooms, with kitchens and toilets placed on the north side of the buildings.

Still, as another Party committee report noted in 1959, workers' families were on waiting lists for housing stretching out from eight to ten years.[23] Not unlike conditions in the late 1940s, about one-fifth of the city's population, or about 1.1 million people in 200,000 households, lived in crude dwellings (简室) or shacks (棚户). Housing would remain chronically scarce until market reforms produced a new, if largely unaffordable, stock of private or 'commodity housing' in Shanghai. But the Workers' New Village project was never envisioned as solving Shanghai's housing shortage; as discussed in this essay, the power of the Workers' New Village was in the realm of the symbolic, not the practical.

Legacies

In 2005, the Shanghai Municipal Government made Caoyang New Village the first post-1949 structure to be designated as Heritage Architecture, thus legally protecting it from demolition. Just as Caoyang New Village was a kind of 'reverse template' of the drab concrete apartment blocks that were built for workers elsewhere in the city under state socialism, the housing styles in the era of 'state capitalism' in Shanghai have made the place an oddity again. Aerial photos show the village wedged amid towering luxury apartment buildings, as a low-lying array of tiled-roof

dwellings among dense foliage; a common if dubious refrain is that the layout resembles the five-pointed red star and symbol of the CCP. But few of today's Shanghai residents choose to live in what looks to be a quaint leafy neighbourhood when viewed from above. The dwellings that were once celebrated as spaces of emancipation are now deemed to be so small by Shanghai standards that the only residents who take advantage of the location and the low rents are migrant workers, whose landlords are the remaining original residents, the model workers of the past.[24] Shanghai's twenty-first–century proletariat lives in housing that once celebrated workers as the 'masters of socialism'.