

## FOR OUR STUDENTS

*Editors' Note:* The following article was selected for publication in the *ASIANetwork Exchange* by Van Symons, Director of the ASIANetwork Student-Faculty Program funded by the Freeman Foundation, as an outstanding example of student scholarship. Christy Ivie traveled to China as a participant in the Program with a team of five students from Illinois Wesleyan University in the summer of 2007 to conduct research on city planning in the early years of the People's Republic (1949-1956). Having selected Beijing, Shanghai, and Hangzhou as case study sites, the team investigated urban problems of the period relating to schools, health care facilities, sanitation, environmental degradation, and housing—the focus of Ms. Ivie's article. The team, mentored by IWU History professor, Thomas Lutze, carried out research in municipal archives, conducted interviews with former Directors of City Planning in each city, and interviewed elderly people in targeted neighborhoods about their experiences and memories of the time. The student researchers presented their findings at the Midwest Conference on Asian Affairs in the fall of 2008.

### **Razing Shantytowns and Raising New Villages:**

Urban Housing in the  
PRC, 1949-56

Christy Ivie  
Illinois Wesleyan University

#### **Abstract**

Although the historical and economic conditions in Beijing, Shanghai, and Hangzhou varied greatly at the times they were liberated, all three cities went through periods of recovery and transition followed by larger-scale construction. The local

governments in all three cities immediately began efforts to improve the living conditions of working class people through city planning and housing initiatives, whether it was cleaning up slums, constructing new worker's dormitories, or surveying the population and repairing dangerous housing. While the extent to which each city received funding from the central government differed, it is clear that each city benefited significantly from improved city planning and improved housing conditions after liberation.

In the first half of the twentieth century, constant political turmoil and military destruction severely worsened housing conditions in China's cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, and Hangzhou. Feuds between powerful warlords ravaged the countryside before a civil war erupted between the Kuomintang, the Nationalist Party led by Chiang Kai-shek, and the Chinese Communist Party, led by Mao Zedong. Although the two parties formed a tenuous United Front to fight against the Japanese during latter years of the fourteen-year long Japanese occupation (1931-1945), the civil war broke out again in 1946 and ended ultimately with the victory of the Communists in 1949. Beijing, an important cultural and political center throughout China's long history, was restored as the national capital. Shanghai, known as a city of sin and adventure for foreigners, was reclaimed by the Chinese after being largely under foreign control since the end of the First Opium War (1842). Nearby Hangzhou, known for its past beauty and its silk production, however, enjoyed neither the political nor the economic significance of the other two. Yet all three cities were in poor condition when the founding of the People's Republic of China was declared from the rostrum of Tiananmen on October 1, 1949.

Once the PRC was established, the leadership focused on two main goals for urban China, improving the economy through an emphasis on industrialization and production, and improving the living conditions of the working people through social reform.<sup>1</sup> With both of these goals in mind, members of the Beijing, Shanghai, and Hangzhou municipal governments, urban planning

specialists, and, later, Soviet advisors set to work to formulate new urban planning policies. However, the new government did more than plan the new urban China; in all these cities, immediate efforts were made to restore, repair, and/or build housing units in order to house the urban poor and improve the living conditions of the laboring masses.

### **The Beijing Housing Situation**

Due to the destruction and filth caused by the Sino-Japanese and civil wars, the period of 1949-1952 was one of recovery and restoration for Beijing. Eight infamous slum districts, including Longxuguo or “Dragon Beard Ditch,” housed the city’s poor in unsanitary, miserable conditions. In 1956 the famous playwright Lao Sheh (Lao She) celebrated the heroic clean-up of Dragon Beard Ditch in his play by the same name. Act I begins with a moving and accurate depiction of the conditions in the slum in 1948:

*The Ditch is full of muddy, slimy water, mixed with rubbish, rags, dead rats, dead cats, dead dogs, and now and then dead children...On the two banks, closely packed together, there live labourers, handicraft workers- the multifarious toiling poor...Their houses may tumble down at any moment; most of their yards have no lavatories, let alone kitchens...Everywhere there are swarms of fleas, clouds of mosquitoes, countless bed-bugs and black sheets of flies, all spreading disease. Whenever it rains, not only do the streets become pools of mud, but water from the Ditch overflows into the yards and houses, which are lower than the street level, and floods everything.”<sup>2</sup>*

All told, some 300,000 citizens of Beijing were either unemployed or under-employed and living in such slums or shantytowns,<sup>3</sup> in small self-made dwellings fabricated with wood and mud.<sup>4</sup> When Beijing was liberated in January of 1949, “two thirds of the houses were dilapidated.”<sup>5</sup>

The top priorities of the People's Government of Beijing were to provide jobs and shelter for the homeless, unemployed and underemployed; to stabilize the economy; and to clean up the eight infamous ditches. Overall, the Government aimed to transform Beijing from a city of consumption to a city of production, while also improving the living conditions of the city's most disadvantaged citizens. Besides cleaning up the slums, the Beijing Government employed many of the homeless and unemployed with construction, clean-up, repair and other city projects.<sup>6</sup> They moved the homeless into temporary shelters, such as temples, that had become public spaces.<sup>7</sup> The new Government also addressed the confusion among citizens regarding housing redistribution. Articles published in the *People's Daily* corrected inaccurate rumors that all housing would be confiscated and rent abolished; reassured owners that private property rights would be protected; and notified the people of a new registration system for all housing property owners.<sup>8</sup> The Government focused heavily on protecting private housing, enforcing reasonable rent, and encouraging landlords to repair their housing properties. However, the Government did confiscate for redistribution all housing property belonging to war criminals or collaborators with the former government<sup>9</sup> and later all unoccupied or abandoned housing.<sup>10</sup>

Many early housing needs for workers were met by the new state-owned enterprises. By June of 1949, even before the official founding of the People's Republic, for example, the Department of Railways in Beijing had taken steps to provide housing for its employees.<sup>11</sup> In July of 1950, the *People's Daily* reported that worker dormitories for the People's Printing Factory, too, were near completion. Workers and their families lived in the two and three-story buildings. Each apartment was equipped with two bedrooms, a bathroom, a kitchen, and a small balcony. Even before completing these two buildings, the People's Printing Factory began construction on another five-story building that would hold 124 families. Nearby they also built a new cafeteria that served 500 people at one time.<sup>12</sup>

After this initial period of recovery and clean-up (1949-1952), the First Five Year Plan (FFYP) was developed. The FFYP “emphasized heavy industrial growth in urban locations, and at a regional scale it directed the major new industrial development projects away from the coastal cities into the inland areas.”<sup>13</sup> The new city plan for Beijing projected a period of twenty years of development that would encompass an area of 500km<sup>2</sup>, accommodating a population of four or five million people.<sup>14</sup> The city was designed such that most of the residential areas were concentrated on the Western side of the city. The residential areas were divided into large city blocks as opposed to the carelessly planned alleyways of the inner city.<sup>15</sup> This approach was based on the Soviet urban planning model of large, self-contained blocks or communities within cities. In 1955, Soviet advisors arrived in Beijing to study the urban planning situation for six months, and a new city plan was devised.

Although the advisor’s opinions were respected, Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong agreed that the Soviet model must be adjusted to fit the specific needs and conditions of Beijing.<sup>16</sup> The plan of 1955 centered on three main priorities for investment: the expansion of Beijing, the development of industries in the suburbs in outlying areas, and the structure of the inner city.<sup>17</sup> In that same year, the big block concept was abandoned for a newer concept of community, the small district (*xiaoqu*), which included 30-60 hectares of land and approximately 10,000-20,000 people. The main objective of the new neighborhoods was to provide all social and public services within each community, thereby relieving some of the population and traffic pressure on the inner city. As for housing, in Beijing and a few other large cities, the FFYP meant large-scale city development and construction. In fact, 9.1 million m<sup>2</sup> of housing was built between 1949 and 1957 in Beijing.<sup>18</sup> This construction was in addition to the massive efforts in the capital and other cities that were put into repairs in the 1950s.<sup>19</sup> Of this 9.1 million m<sup>2</sup> of housing, 1.57 million m<sup>2</sup> was built in the first three years after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China during the same

time, all this in addition to another 1.37 million m<sup>2</sup> of factories, colleges and universities, hotels, hospitals, and other industrial or public service buildings that were built.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Situation in Shanghai**

Like Beijing, Shanghai was a major focus of urban planning development after the Communist Revolution. Because of its vital role as China's main industrial and commercial center (in 1947 Shanghai contributed 69.4% of China's total foreign trade<sup>21</sup>), it became a priority for the new government. Unlike Beijing, Shanghai had been a "semi-feudal and semi-colonial port city of finance, commerce, and manufacturing."<sup>22</sup> Until its liberation in May 1949, much of Shanghai had been governed by separate foreign concessions as a result of the Treaty of Nanjing (1842), which effectively ended the First Opium War and opened the city as a port for international trade. Within China, it was seen as a city of consumption, corruption, and debauchery, a destination for foreign imperialists and adventurers. It was reported by Stretton (1978) that "in 1937 twenty thousand corpses were said to have been removed from the pavements of Shanghai's European quarter alone."<sup>23</sup> The sharp divide between rich and poor, West and East within the city is evidenced in a first-hand account of the city written by Basil Davidson in 1953:

Apart from two or three luxury hotels...Shanghai has few buildings which are modern in the proper sense of the word. The famous Bund, where a wide road curves along the brink of Soochow Creek, has some large office buildings: behind them the drab and sordid confusion of an Asian slum begins at once, and seems never to end.<sup>24</sup>

Clearly, although the history and context of this city were very different from that of Beijing, the capital city of the new People's Republic, Shanghai at the time of liberation also struggled with many of the same issues of clean-up and restoration as Beijing. In both cases, the new government faced the challenge of addressing the pressure on inner-city housing resources, and providing housing for the city's poor. In Shanghai,

from an urban planning perspective this task was even more daunting because of the lack of a comprehensive city plan prior to 1949.<sup>25</sup>

Foreign capitalists had built roads, buildings, and other facilities in their neighborhoods, and water and electricity systems were divided by concessions. In an effort to end this fragmentation, in 1946 a group of technocrats not affiliated with the Kuomintang government drafted a city plan that combined Western and Eastern influences. This plan was never utilized, however, and it was abandoned after the Kuomintang was removed from power. When Shanghai was liberated in May 1949, the technocrats gave the plan to the new city government as a gift, and many of them continued to work for the People's Government. Thus, when a new city plan was produced by city officials and Soviet advisors in 1950, it was heavily influenced by the plan of 1946.<sup>26</sup>

The priorities of the new government of Shanghai were similar to those of Beijing: to improve the living conditions of the laboring people, and to serve industry in order to develop Shanghai still more as a city of production.<sup>27</sup> In order to accomplish these goals and relieve traffic and population pressure in the inner city, the People's Government planned and built self-sufficient neighborhood units called "New Villages," which included not only housing but nearby public services, green spaces, entertainment halls, and cafeterias. In fact, during this time period the standard of living for workers living in these New Villages surpassed even that of some city officials.<sup>28</sup>

Two neighborhood units built in Shanghai in the early 1950's were Caoyang and Rihui New Villages. Caoyang was built in 1950-1951 with the help of Soviet advisors. Located in the northwest part of Shanghai, this New Village was 3.5km from the central Putuo area, an industrial area where the residents of Caoyang worked. It extended into the northwest suburbs of Shanghai, surrounded by farmland. According to an article in the Shanghai Municipal Archives, the service buildings in the area met the basic needs of the population, and the only planned

facility that was not built was a cinema.<sup>29</sup> Rihui New Village was built in the southern part of the city. Its location was selected because of its proximity to public transportation and public welfare facilities. Several medium and small-scale factories were located nearby. The city planners faced many challenges in building Rihui because, unlike Caoyang, it was built in the middle of an existing inner city neighborhood. Housing construction was difficult because the population was already so concentrated that demolishing and rebuilding housing units would have meant displacing a large number of people.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, Rihui was not as successful as Caoyang, and it was reported in 1957 that the construction of a complete integrated village at Rihui had still not been finished.<sup>31</sup>

The housing design of the units built in Caoyang and Rihui between 1949 and 1956 varied. The standard design in the early part of this period was two story dormitory-style housing, in which several families shared a corridor and kitchen.<sup>32</sup> These were typically brick and wood structures, reinforced with steel beams. Later, apartment-style buildings were constructed, with two to three families per story, and each family occupying two or three rooms. These were two or three story structures made mostly from wood, with bamboo floors in the kitchen and bathrooms.<sup>33</sup>

In Caoyang New Village, for example, eight new Model Worker apartment buildings were built in 1950. In July of 1952, the first 48 families moved into the two story buildings. Although the neighborhood has changed greatly, several of these buildings still stand, next to a large park (also built in 1950) and outdoor exercise equipment in the middle of the bustling complex. When talking with the residents of these buildings, it becomes clear that the construction of this village dramatically improved their living conditions after liberation. One elderly woman with whom we spoke had lived as a squatter in the Zhabei District slum before moving into a Model Worker apartment in 1952. She and her husband worked in a nearby switch factory, and after liberation they began attending a night school for workers in order to learn how to read and write. They were able to do so

because when the 48 families moved in, the neighborhood was already equipped with nearby public markets, grocery stores, primary schools, cafeterias, and entertainment halls.<sup>34</sup> These facilities had been created at the same time as the housing units as part of the city planning goal of making each neighborhood self-sufficient. According to the two women interviewed, this experience was typical of those who moved into the new housing units at Caoyang. Many of the unemployed or self-employed (those who unloaded ships on the docks, for example) who lived in the slum districts or shantytowns, were given jobs at local factories, and were therefore eligible for worker housing.<sup>35</sup>

While similar efforts were made in Beijing and Shanghai immediately after the establishment of the People's Republic to improve housing conditions for the urban poor, these findings cannot be generalized to include all Chinese cities during this time period. Special attention was given to these cities by the new government precisely because they were the political/cultural center (Beijing) and the industrial/commercial center (Shanghai) of China. Hangzhou, a popular tourist destination and the capital of Zhejiang Province in eastern China makes an excellent comparative study to illustrate this point.

### **The Hangzhou Situation**

Unlike Beijing and Shanghai, Hangzhou did not receive investment funds from the central government after liberation in April 1949. While a few beautiful hotels and villas lined the banks of West Lake, most of the city's population lived in houses made of wood and mud.<sup>36</sup> These houses were generally small, one-room structures built by the inhabitants themselves, much like those in the slum districts of Beijing and Shanghai.

After liberation, Hangzhou's Ministry of Construction conducted a survey concerning housing and living conditions in order to assess the situation and decide where needs for improvement were most urgent.<sup>37</sup> Like Beijing, Hangzhou first went through a two-year period of recovery and transition. As for housing during this period, without investment from the central

government, the local government implemented a policy of “basic improvements for dangerous housing and minor-scale renovation and construction (*xiao da xiao jian*).”<sup>38</sup> In the fall of 1951, planning for city construction began, with one of the main objectives being to serve the working class people. After 1953, widespread construction began. However, economic constraints placed limits on what the new government could achieve, and information was not available at the time of our research as to how much construction or repair actually took place.

### **Conclusion**

In sum, although the historical and economic conditions in Beijing, Shanghai, and Hangzhou varied greatly at the times they were liberated, all three cities went through periods of recovery and transition followed by larger-scale construction. The local governments in all three cities immediately began efforts to improve the living conditions of working class people through city planning and housing initiatives, whether it was cleaning up slums, constructing new worker’s dormitories, or surveying the population and repairing dangerous housing. While the extent to which each city received funding from the central government differed, it is clear that each city benefited significantly from improved city planning and housing conditions after liberation.

### **Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup>Interviews with former Directors of City Planning in all three cities emphasized the slogan, “Increase production; Improve workers’ livelihoods.” Beijing, 7/2/2007; Shanghai, 7/9/2008; Hangzhou, 7/12/2008.

<sup>2</sup>Lao, Sheh (Lao She), *Dragon Beard Ditch*. Foreign Languages Press: Peking, 1956.

<sup>3</sup>Interview with Beijing Urban Planning Official 7/2/2007

<sup>4</sup>“Material About the Construction of Beijing Since Liberation” Volume 5, Part II p. 255 Translated by Zan Tao

<sup>5</sup>Wang, Ya Ping and Alan Murie, *Housing Policy and Practice in China*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, Inc. 1999, p. 48.

<sup>6</sup>Interview with Beijing Urban Planning Official 7/2/2007

- <sup>7</sup>“Committee Established in Each of the Seven Districts of Beijing,” *The People’s Daily* , 6/8/1950 translated by Zan Tao 7/3/2007
- <sup>8</sup>“Note Regarding Housing in Beijing,” issued by the Military Administration Committee of Beijing, published in the *People’s Daily* 5/16-17/1949, translated by Zan Tao 6/29/2007
- <sup>9</sup>“Real Estate Ownership Contract to be Distributed,” *People’s Daily*, 8/15/1949, translated by Zan Tao 7/3/2007
- <sup>10</sup>“Beijing Government Publishes a Temporary Method Concerning Unoccupied Housing Property in the Urban Area of Beijing,” *People’s Daily* 3/22/1950, translated by Zan Tao 7/3/2007
- <sup>11</sup>“The Department of Railways Establishes an Institute for Housing Property Administration,” *People’s Daily* 6/5/1949, translated by Zan Tao 6/29/2007
- <sup>12</sup>“Beijing People’s Printing Factory Worker Dormitories Nears Completion,” *People’s Daily* 7/25/1950 translated by Zan Tao 7/3/2007
- <sup>13</sup>Wang and Murie, p. 57
- <sup>14</sup>“Collective Mediation in Housing Disputes Succeeds in Three Districts”
- <sup>15</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup>Wang and Murie, p. 65
- <sup>19</sup>Richard Kirkby, “China” in *Housing Policies in the Socialist Third World*. London: Mansell Publishing Limited, 1990. p. 295.
- <sup>20</sup>“Material Concerning Construction in Beijing Since Liberation,” Vol. 5, Part I, p.6 Peking University Archives. Translated by Zan Tao
- <sup>21</sup>Sit, Victor F.S., Ed. *Chinese Cities: The Growth of Metropolis Since 1949*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 1985, p. 101
- <sup>22</sup>Ibid.

- <sup>23</sup>Stretton, Hugh. *Urban Planning in Rich and Poor Countries*. (New York: Oxford University Press), 1978 p. 135
- <sup>24</sup>Davidson, Basil. *Daybreak in China*. (London: Jonathan Cape), 1953. p. 69
- <sup>25</sup>Lecture by former Shanghai city officials 7/9/2007
- <sup>26</sup>Lecture by Luan Laoshi at Tongji University 7/7/2007
- <sup>27</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup>Building Processes for Cao Yang and Rihui New Villages, 1951-1957, Article A54-2-158-82, translated by Ren Chao
- <sup>30</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup>Housing Design in Caoyang and Rihui New Villages from Shanghai Municipal Archives, translated by Ren Chao
- <sup>33</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup>Interview with two elderly residents of Caoyang New Village, Shanghai, 7/8/2007
- <sup>35</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>36</sup>Interview with , Sun Dongjia, former Director of City Planning in Hangzhou. Hangzhou Planning Bureau 7/12/2007
- <sup>37</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>38</sup>Ibid.