
PUBLIC HOUSING OF EARLY MODERN TIANJIN (1928-1937)

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Societal reform, the planning and construction of public housing and the introduction of new building typologies went hand in hand in early modern China. Western and Japanese debates on public housing served as models, and Chinese scholars and professionals with the support of the KMT (Kuomintang) developed public housing as a sign of innovation both in terms of societal organization and building typology. Using the under-researched case of Tianjin's public housing in the so-called Golden Decade (1928 -1937) as a case study, the paper first explores how journals and foreign trained Chinese scholars introduced the concept of modern housing to China through publications, and early constructions. Notably the YMCA Labours Model New Village in Shanghai impressed the KMT leader Chiang Kai-shek. It then explores three public housing projects developed for Tianjin, only one of which was realized. Exploring the locations, architectural designs, renting regulations and management rules of these projects, the paper argues that these projects (both planned and realized) aimed mostly at poor families, and served as a means to solve housing problems and reform society as well as to police the poor. The public housing projects in this period formed the foundation for later public housing in China.

Keywords

public housing, early modern Tianjin, war recovery

How to Cite

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INTRODUCTION

In *Fundamentals of National Reconstruction* published in 1924, Sun Yat-sen, the first president and founding father of the Republic of China, argued that “the government should co-operate with the people to build houses on a large scale in order that they might procure comfortable shelter”¹. His statement came as a reaction to the dramatic population increase and the resulting housing shortage in most metropolitan areas in China that had started with the forced opening of Chinese port cities by foreign powers after 1840 and the industrialization initiated by them in the treaty ports. Inclusion of Western and Japanese ideas of public housing to China in 1920s led to the construction of public housing in Chinese big cities such as Nanjing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Qingdao and Tianjin from 1928 to 1937². In contrast to other cities, where ample research on public housing exists, scholars have ignored the case of Tianjin during this time and some have even argued that planning and design of public housing in Tianjin began only after 1936³. This paper analyzes three proposed public housing plans by Tianjin municipal government, and their implementation during the so-called Golden Decade (1928 -1937).

This paper argues that Tianjin, the most important treaty port in northern China, was an integral part in the national public housing debate. The city experienced rapid industrial development in the early 19th century and became the largest industrial and commercial center in northern China in 1920s, as well as an attractive destination for people who sought jobs. In 1928, when the KMT reunited China by ending the so-called Warlord Era, large additional numbers of people who lost their homes in the war poured into metropolitan areas including Tianjin, making the housing shortage even more significant. In fact, compared to Shanghai, Guangzhou and Nanjing Tianjin experienced the highest population increase during 1910-1928 (Table 1).

CITY	TIANJIN	SHANGHAI	GUANGZHOU	NANJING
Population around 1910	198715	601432	520666	269000
Population in 1928	1388747	2726046	811751	497526
Percent Growth Rate	599.00%	353.00%	56.00%	85.00%

TABLE 1 Comparison between population in Tianjin, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Nanjing.

Sources: compiled by the author based on The Social Life History of Tianjin in Republic of China, 10; “Shanghai Population Rose by Three Thousand Times in one hundred years.” Real Estate Quarterly 2(1945): 96; “Population Statistics Over the Years in Guangzhou.” New Guangzhou Monthly 3(1931): 76.

INTRODUCTION OF PUBLIC HOUSING TO CHINA THROUGH JOURNALS AND MODEL HOUSING

Progressive intellectuals in China were concerned about the housing problem and tried to find answers in the Western and Japanese experience. The number and quality of journal articles published by Chinese scholars demonstrates the extent of Chinese awareness of foreign, Western and Japanese, housing policies in the 1920s and promoted their concepts to the public. Chinese writer and thinker Zhou Zuoren described his experience in the Japanese cooperative new village in Miyazaki Prefecture, initiated by Japanese novelist Saneatsu Mushanokoji in 1918⁴. The capitalist democracy scholar Zhu Yinong discussed the housing shortage problem of America, Britain, France, Japan, Germany and Netherlands after the war and the respective governmental responses⁵. He also introduced the British housing laws including the Labouring Class Lodging Houses Act 1851, the Housing of Working Class Act 1890 and The Housing, Town Planning, &c. Act 1919⁶. The editor of the *Eastern Miscellany* (东方杂志) Qian Zhixiu, whose pen name was Jian Hu, introduced British co-operative housing and called on the Chinese to learn the tenant’s co-partnership system⁷. Moreover, there were other articles that discussed the American labour housing and Japanese Renewal of Poor Housing Districts Act of 1927⁸. These articles were all published by the most influential Chinese magazines, which aimed to introduce the foreign advanced thoughts and were widely welcomed by scholars, students, financial professionals and government officials⁹.

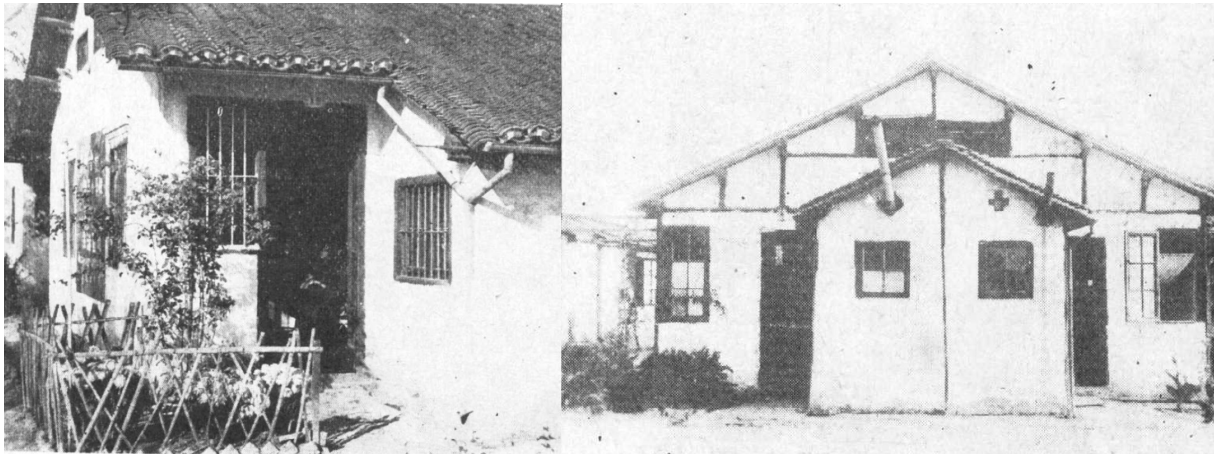


FIGURE 1 House Type A (right) and B (left) of YMCA Labours Model New Village in Shanghai.

A physical example, and perhaps even more important inspiration for public housing in China was the YMCA Labours Model New Village built in Shanghai in 1926 supervised by the Glasgow-trained Chinese social thinker M. Thomas Tchou. Tchou went to Scotland in 1908 and received a Bachelor of Science degree in naval architecture and a Bachelor of Science in mechanical and civil engineering at the University of Glasgow. After he returned to China, Tchou became the executive secretary of the industrial department of the Shanghai YMCA in 1921. There, he studied the labour conditions within China and began reform efforts¹⁰. In 1923, Tchou made an extensive trip to study labour conditions in America and Europe¹¹. Upon his return he published a series of articles on labour reform. He discussed the cooperative movements in England and other western countries including housing cooperative societies, and argued that cooperation was a means to China's regeneration¹². He also raised a plan of labour reform in China that emphasized public housing, cooperation and education¹³. In 1926, Tchou had conducted an extensive investigation to the living condition of the working class in Shanghai and persuaded the YMCA leadership to provide housing for the workers¹⁴. The YMCA Labours Model New Village in Shanghai was an experiment of Tchou's idea of labour reform, which received donations from all sectors, including factories, companies, religious organizations, KTM leaders and Chinese and foreign philanthropists¹⁵. The construction started in 1926, featuring two types with different sizes and rents to satisfy different needs of the tenants, and by 1928, there were altogether 24 houses, each consisting of a sitting room, a bedroom, a kitchen, and a bathroom (Figure 1). At the center of the village was the so-called Mott Hut that provided social, educational, and recreational programs¹⁶. Apart from solving the housing shortage of the working class, the YMCA Labours Model New Village also aimed to improve the society by applying a self-governance system and encouraging education and cooperation (Figure 1)¹⁷.

The success of the YMCA Labours Model New Village immediately won praise from all circles¹⁸. It also impressed the KMT (Kuomintang) leader Chiang Kai-shek who wrote a few words of appreciation for the village, which was a great honor for the YMCA village¹⁹. Tchou believed that social unrest was due to a lack of education in the working class, arguing that this was the reason why the socialist revolution happened in Russia instead of the US or Britain²⁰. For him, education and cooperation were an essential part in the new village, and this idea also influenced public housing constructed in China later. The KMT government accepted his ideas and recruited him as the Director of Labour of the Ministry of Trade and Industry where he served from 1928 and 1930. In this position he continued to promote the labours model new village²¹.

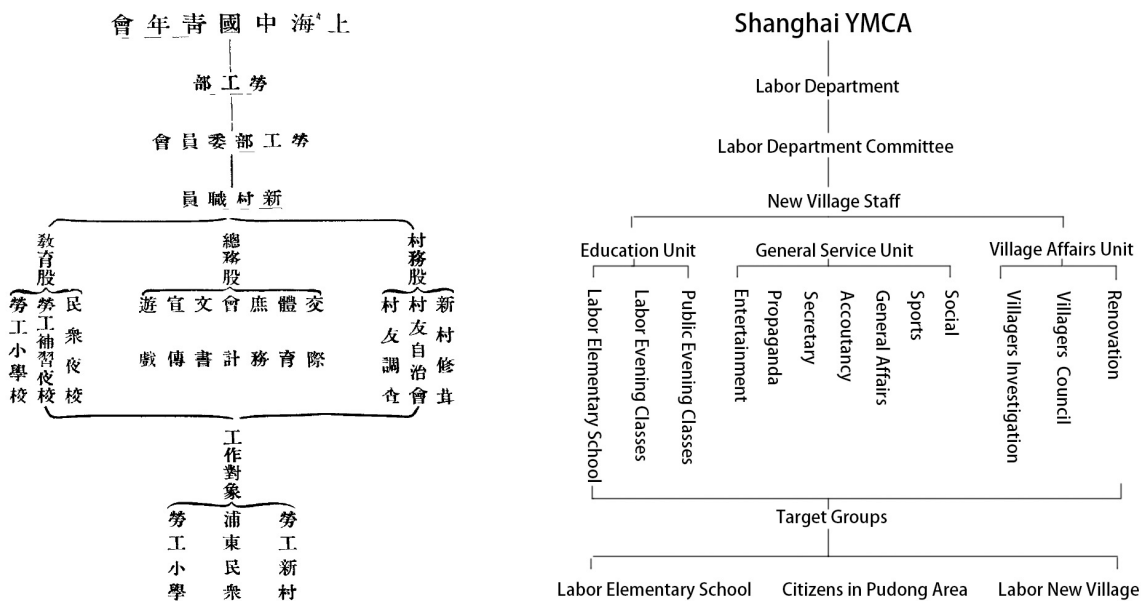


FIGURE 2 Organizational Structure of the YMCA Labours Model New Village in Shanghai. This project was both a social and a physical innovation.

GOLDEN DECADE (1928-1937): EARLY ATTEMPTS ON PUBLIC HOUSING IN URBAN PLANNING

More western ideas on public housing were introduced to China after 1928, at the beginning of the so-called “Golden Decade” in modern Chinese history (that would end with the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937). At the time, the KMT controlled national political power and implemented its program to build a modern nation. During this period, attention to public housing increased in China as documented through the translation of books such as *Housing Policy in Britain* (英國の住宅政策) and *The Housing Situations in the United States* that popularized the concept of public housing in China and paid particular interest to the improvement of the conditions of the workers and the poor²².

These national debates translated into local proposals. In the *Capital Plan* for Nanjing announced by the National Capital Reconstruction Technical Office (国都技术专员办事处) in 1929, and prepared with the support of foreign experts Henry Murphy and Ernest P. Goodrich as consultants, there is a specific chapter arguing that public housing was extremely important in modern urban planning and that Nanjing should learn from the western countries on developing the policy. Similarly, public authorities in Tianjin elaborated two plans that reflected the importance that both the scholars and the government attached importance to public housing in the city. Unlike the *Capital Plan* for which the Chinese authorities had invited foreign experts, the *City Plan for Tientsin* was prepared by two American-trained Chinese professionals Zhangrui and Liangsicheng, regarded public housing as one of the six most important types of public buildings in *The City Plan for Tientsin* (天津特别市物质建设方案) (Figure 3) established in 1930²³. The plan for Tianjin is thus the first example for an urban plan that proposed public housing that was designed by Chinese professionals.

The other plan showed the Tianjin municipal government's concern in public housing rather than scholars. Also in 1930, the Land Bureau of Tianjin municipal government announced a zoning plan of Tianjin, which adopted the land-use-based zonal classification system of Frankfurt as other urban plans in China usually did at that time²⁴. Apart from the Residential District, there was a Poor People's District in the plan, designed to house factory workers and to be erected by the government:

The Poor People's District is located next to the Industrial District. Since factory workers are usually living in poverty, the government will build [public housing in] the Poor People's District and let the factory workers move in²⁵.

Although these two plans of Tianjin were not realized due to political tensions and financial limitations, the proposal showed that the government had picked up on the scholarly debate and attached importance to public housing in Tianjin.

THREE PROJECTS IN TIANJIN: MODELLED ON THE YMCA LABOURS MODEL NEW VILLAGE

Public housing in Tianjin was an epitome of public housing in China, which showed a strong influence of the YMCA Labours Model New Village. Impressed by the success of the YMCA Labours Model New Village, the KMT adopted public housing as a tool to solve housing problems and reform society as well as to police the poor. In October 1928, the Ministry of the Interior started public housing by ordering the local governments to build housing for civilians. It ordered that local governments should fund public housing, that the locations should be close to the working places of the poor, that the target groups should be low income population groups, and that the rent should be the lowest²⁶.

During the Golden Decade, the Tianjin municipal government came up with three public housing plans: one new village plan and two poor's residence plans. Due to the changes of government officials and insufficient funding, only one poor's residence, the Poor's Residence of Tianjin's First Municipal Poorhouse was constructed.

PAIDI NEW VILLAGE (排地新村) PLAN

After the so-called Northern Expedition led by the KMD leader Chiang Kai-shek to unify China under his control, in 1928, about 100,000 refugees from Shandong and Zhili Province flooded into Tianjin²⁷. In June, the number of refugee camps in Tianjin had increased to 28, but still the existing structures could not meet the need of the rapidly increasing population²⁸.

Although the local newspaper reported in December 1928 that the Social Affairs Bureau of Tianjin intended to set up a civilian village in the empty land outside the city and adopt the system of new village, the first new village plan, Paidi New Village Construction Plan (排地新村建设方案), was made by the Public Security Bureau half a year later. Paidi was a scarcely populated area in Tianjin where people lived dispersedly and banditry happened frequently. Zeng Yanyi, the director of the Public Security Bureau, wanted to reorganize the villages in Paidi area, add social facilities and turn it into a highly civilized new village in a few years²⁹.

The government could not afford to build sufficient housing for the poor villagers and had to turn to the private sector:

Although it will be fine if the government could provide housing at the designated locations and rent them [to the poor villagers], the government could not afford it due to lack of financial resources. The best way to solve the problem is let the rich villagers in the designated village provide housing for the poor to rent³⁰.

In addition to privately funded rental housing, the government also made plans for the new housing area and tried to persuade the villagers to construct by themselves.

Just like the YMCA Labours Model New Village, the Paidi New Village was planned to employ the self-governance system, which means villagers looked after their common programs by themselves, such as constructing roads and channels, planting trees and building elementary schools for children of the villagers. However, the villages were not totally self-governed since the police would supervise them. In a speech at Paidi, Zeng said he hoped the Paidi New Village could be a civil-military cooperation based on local police stations. He divided the police there into a security group that protected the villagers from banditry and an administrative group that supervised the autonomous entity³¹.

The Paidi New Village Plan was abandoned after Zeng Yanyi was promoted to become the captain of the Fourth Artillery Brigade. It is important to note that the government's purpose in this plan was not only to provide housing and promote the social reform, but also to police the villagers, which is quite different from the YMCA Labours Model New Village and Western public housing introduced to China through the journals. It showed the KMT's real purpose of public housing was to protect their power.

THE POOR'S RESIDENCE(贫民住所) OF TIANJIN'S FIRST MUNICIPAL POORHOUSE

In 1930, the population of the poor in Tianjin reached 357000, accounting for a quarter of the total population³². Many of the poor were shack-dwellers who lived in densely packed self-built straw-shacks in slums. To investigate the living conditions of the poor and show the government's determination to help them, on March 16, 1930, the director of the Social Affairs Bureau, Feng Sizhi, paid a visit to the shack-dwellers on the embankment near Fazheng Bridge (Figure 4). According to the investigation, there were about 1000 poor people living there, including rickshaw pullers, sewing women (缝穷妇), small traders, jobless old men and widows³³. The straw-shacks were built in a high density on the embankment with heights from 1.3 meters to 3 meters that man could only stoop to enter. And the land rent was only one to two yuan per straw-shack per year. The environment was terrible with dirty straw and muck everywhere³⁴. Impressed by the horrible living conditions of the shack-dwellers, Feng Sizhi believed that the primary task to relieve the poor was solving the housing problem, which meant to provide formal housing for them.

Unlike the Paidi New Village that was planned totally by the Public Security Bureau, this time, six different bureaus of Tianjin government were involved in planning the poor's residence. The Land Bureau was in charge of finding an appropriate site and negotiating with the landowner, while the Works Bureau was responsible for architectural design, the Finance Bureau and Social Affairs Bureau applied for funding, the Education Bureau planned the educational facilities and the Public Security Bureau recruited the shack-dwellers and relocated them in the poor's residence³⁵. Moreover, the municipal government also cooperated with the Chinese Businessmen Race Club of Tianjin in adding a game to raise money especially for the poor's residence³⁶. Eventually, 3,900 yuan raised by the Chinese Businessmen Race Club combined with more than 1,000 yuan from the surplus of 1929 winter relief was used for construction of the poor's residence³⁷.

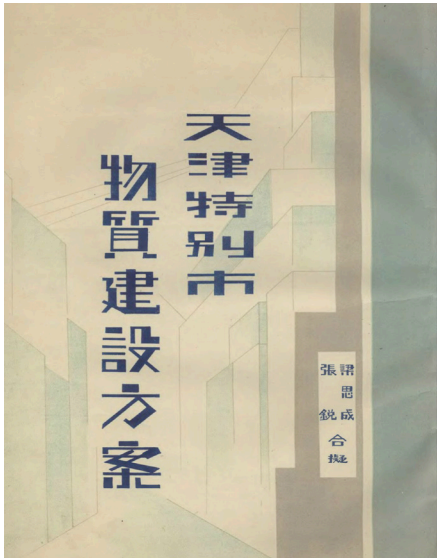


FIGURE 3 Cover of City Plan for Tientsin



FIGURE 4 Feng Sizhi Visited the Shack-dwellers in Tianjin.

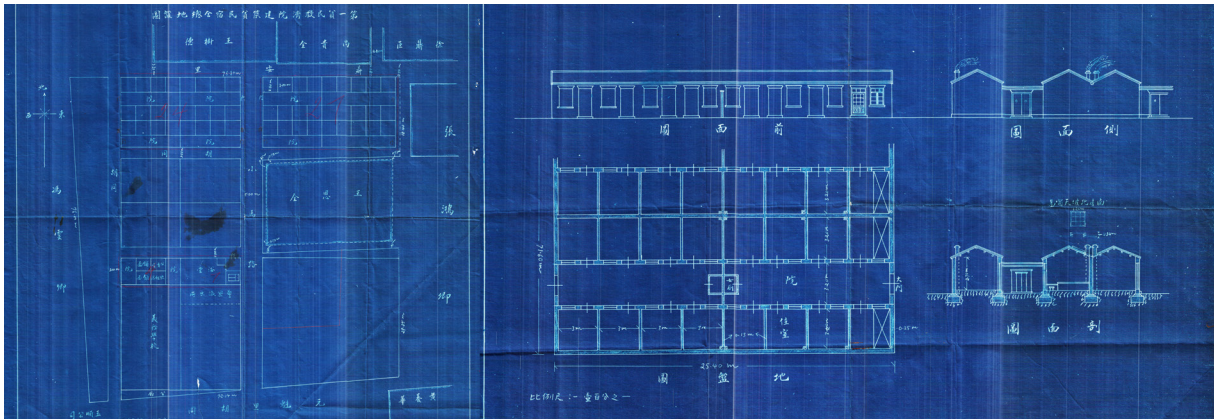


FIGURE 5 Architectural drawings of the poor's residence (贫民住) of Tianjin's First Municipal Poorhouse

The location of the poor's residence was near the Hebei New District, in the vicinity of factories that employed poor people. By 15 June 1931, most buildings in the poor's residence were finished except a police station and a school³⁸. Occupying an area of 60 mu (4,000m²), the poor's residence consisted of 51 units for renting, 7 public bathrooms, 2 storefronts and a grocery store³⁹. The units were single-storey row houses subdivided into 8 courtyards with one public toilet in each courtyard (Figure 5)⁴⁰. Compared with the unit of public housing projects in other Chinese metropolises in the same period that usually had two or more rooms, here there was only one 3m×3.2m room per unit, which was quite small⁴¹. Since the funding was limited, by adopting this type of unit, the residential area could have more units to benefit more families.

Under Feng's recommendation, the municipal government consigned the project to Tianjin's First Municipal Poorhouse. Chen Xiaozhuang, the head of the poorhouse, described the future of the poor's residence as a utopia: After the completion of the new poor's residential area, we should set up production cooperatives, consumer cooperatives, family club, parks, schools and raise money to loan to the poor. The production cooperatives will help the poor to make a living by doing handicrafts and the consumer cooperatives will sell basic commodities especially to the poor for no profit. With the gradually implement of these facilities, the living conditions of the poor will be improved⁴².

According to the rental rules of the poor's residence, the rent of one unit was only one yuan per month, which was relatively low compared with the rent of public housing in Shanghai and Nanjing at that time (Table 2)⁴³. It was also stipulated that the tenants should be poor people who had a job and their family members. In this way, it ensured that the residence was rented to people in need who could afford it. Moreover, the government used rental rules, which emphasized hygiene and forbade gambling, to govern the poor's behaviors.

THE DAWANGZHUANG(大王庄) POOR'S RESIDENCE PLAN

Another public housing project in Tianjin was inspired by an investigation of the capital Nanjing. In March 1935, the mayor of Tianjin, Zhang Tingge, sent his secretary, Xu Yili, to the capital Nanjing to investigate the municipal situation there. When Xu returned to Tianjin, his report about the public housing in Nanjing impressed the leaders. At that time, Tianjin was still facing the housing shortage problem. Although some real estate companies had constructed housing projects for the citizens to rent, the rents were too high for the poor. Zhang and the chairman of Hebei Province, Yu Xuezhong, planned to build several poor's residential areas in Tianjin according to the New Life Principles⁴⁴.

In April, the Social Affairs Bureau had made a plan for the new poor's residence⁴⁵. In terms of the style and materials, Yu pointed out that the poor's residence should refer to the farmhouse in Shandong province, which was constructed with mud and straw, and only cost a quarter as much as the normal brick house⁴⁶. According to a newspaper report in May, Zhang said the funding for the poor's residence would be loaned from the bank and that he was quite confident about adding more residences for the poor in the future⁴⁷.

The new poor's residence learned a lesson from the Commoners Residential Districts in Nanjing, which had a low occupancy rate because the location was too far away from the places where jobs were available⁴⁸. The new poor's residence in Tianjin was proposed in the Dawangzhuang area, where a lot of poor workers sought a living. The successful Poor's Residence of Tianjin's First Municipal Poorhouse also had a similar location, which was close to factories.

The Dawangzhuang Poor's Residence Plan was abandoned following the Japanese occupation that led to the removal of Zhang and Yu in June 1935, who refused to collaborate with the Japanese forces.

These three public housing projects in Tianjin reflected public housing realizations in China during 1928-1937. Although the number of public housing units actually built in Tianjin was less than the numbers of Shanghai and Nanjing and far from meeting the demand because of political wars and financial limitations, the simple architectural design, appropriate locations, relatively low rent, and the restriction of tenant's according to income assured that the public housing in Tianjin benefited more poor families who needed housing most. In terms of this, the public housing in Tianjin was more practical and friendly to the poor.

	THE POOR'S RESIDENCE OF TIANJIN'S FIRST MUNICIPAL POORHOUSE	FIRST COMMONERS RESI- DENCE	COMMONERS HOUSING AT HONGWU GATE
Location	Tianjin	Shanghai	Nanjing
Construction Period	Commenced on 25/11/1930, com- pleted on 15/06/1931.	Commenced on 13/05/1929, com- pleted on 13/08/1929.	First phrase completed on 11/1928, second phrase completed on 12/1928.
Rent per Unit(yuan)	1	2	3
Unit Type	Single-storey row houses, 1 room per unit.	Single-storey row houses, 2 rooms per unit.	Single-storey row houses, 2 rooms per unit.
No. of Units	51	100	200

TABLE 2 Comparison between the public housing projects in Tianjin, Shanghai and Nanjing.

Source: compiled by the author based on Tianjin Municipal Archives, [401206800-J0131-1-000482]; "Regulating Urban Living: the Social and Spatial Segregation of Nanjing, 1927-1937." *Construction(营造)* 5(2010), 240-272; "Civilian Residential Construction of Shanghai (1928-1949)." PhD diss. 12.

CONCLUSION

Although various thoughts on public housing from Western countries and Japan were introduced into China via journals and books during 1920s and 1930s, most public housing projects in China in the Golden Decade were modeled on the YMCA Labours Model New Village in Shanghai, which emphasized education and cooperation, and which had the support from the KMT. The KMT regarded public housing as a means to not only solving housing shortage, but also social reform.

The scale of the constructed public housing project in Tianjin was smaller than those in Shanghai and Nanjing, however, with limited sources, the project in Tianjin was more efficient and practical considering the location, architectural design and renting regulations. Moreover, the examination of early attempts at public housing in Tianjin also showed that the municipal government adopted the self-governance system in public housing on one hand, but set up local police stations to supervise and control the tenants on the other hand. In terms of this, and considering that the KMT's political status was still not stable in these early years after it reunited China, the KMT's real purpose of public housing was to protect its power.

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Figure 1: Zhang Mingqin. “Tenth Anniversary Speech of the YMCA Labours Model New Village in Shanghai (上海青年会浦东劳工新村十周年纪念感言).” *Shanghaiqingnian*(上海青年), (53)1935:16.

Figure 2: *Shanghaiqingnian* (上海青年), 14; diagram on the right drawn by the author.

Figure 3: Liang Sicheng, Zhangrui. *City Plan for Tientsin* (天津特别市物质建设方案). Tianjin: Peiyang Art Press, 1930.

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