

Re-uncovering the collectivism in Mao's China, 1950s-1970s

The workers' villages in Northeast China

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Abstract

This article focuses on the workers' villages in Northeast China during Mao's period (1950s-1970s). This region is considered as one of the first that realized socialist industrialization, where an explicit emphasis was put on the broad new living-conditions and lifestyle of the industrial employees' lives. This study will illustrate, that due to the sufficiency of supplementary infrastructure and facilities, together with a highly ideological administration, such workers' villages can be described as micro-society, apart from the city, enhancing the inner members' collectivity as a whole. At the same time, on a social level, people in workers' villages lived as one collective through their everyday interaction and self-management. This regime was challenged in the 1978-national reform when the decline was announced of the established structure and regulations served towards the egalitarianism, collectivism, and ultimately communism. At the same time those workers villages were absorbed in the growing Chinese cities, making them part of the present-day urban fabric. This article also emphasizes the importance of this vanished collectivism, which is more than just a communist product that reflects past political, social, economic, cultural, and spatial facets, but is also a rare and important heritage with an important socio-spatial significance.

Keywords

communist regime, industrial neighbourhood, socio-spatial perspective, identity, architectural heritage.

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INTRODUCTION

The term *collectivism* is well-established in the Chinese society and is usually associated with *solidarity*, *dedication*, *selflessness*, and even *patriotism*. It is considered a traditional virtue of the Chinese nation and a moral principle in the revolution and construction led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)¹. The Modern Chinese Dictionary² explains it as: the idea of starting everything from the collective and putting collective interests above individual interests, which is one of the basic spirits of socialism and communism. From an international perspective, *collectivism* was introduced by Engels as early as the end of the 19th century³; Lafargue (a student of Marx and Engels) in his article “Collectivism - Communism” published in 1888 focused on the concept of *collectivism* in economy⁴. The first person to really define *collectivism* was the Soviet scholar Lunacharsky, who argued that “the basis of proletarian morality is the principle of collectivism, and that the interests of society take precedence over the individual.”⁵ Stalin believed in the unity of the collective and the individual: “There is not and should not be an irreconcilable opposition between the individual and the collective, between individual and collective interests. There should not be such an opposition because collectivism, socialism, does not deny individual interests, but combines individual and collective interests.”⁶ At the end of the 20th century, *collectivism* was gradually not considered the preserve of communist countries, and was most classically analysed by Triandis⁷ as a syndrome of feelings, emotions, beliefs, ideology, and actions, which is reflected in the following seven areas:

1. Considering the impact of one's decisions and actions on others (gains and losses).
2. The sharing of material goods.
3. The sharing of immaterial goods, such as time and energy.
4. Vulnerability to social influences.
5. Valuing self-expression and evaluation of others.
6. Sharing of consequences, e.g., a member's mistakes implicate the whole group.
7. Involvement in personal lives of others.

At the same time, he distinguishes societies between *collectivist culture* and *individualist culture* according to their social attributes. Of course, both cultures must exist in different societies, and the difference is only whether collectivism or individualism prevails. There is no doubt that East Asian societies belong to the *collectivist culture*⁸, especially after China entered 1950s, *collectivism* was strongly preached and implemented, reflected in all aspects⁹.

Similar to Soviet Union, the new China centred its initial socialist construction on the establishment of a heavy industrial system. During the First and Second Five-Year Plans (1953-1962), a large number of those industrial projects, referred to as the “156 Key Projects”, were initiated with the aid of Soviet technology and personnel. Most of them were located on the outskirts of cities or even far away from them. As early as 1845, Engels pointed out that housing was important for the working class¹⁰. Out of the demand of solving the practical difficulties of workers' life, implementing the concept of socialism and fulfilling the political promises of the ruling party, the government imitated the concept and form of collective housing of the Soviet

Union and built residential areas for industrial workers adjacent to factories, which were also called “workers’ villages” or “workers’ new villages”. In addition to housing, the workers’ village was equipped with adequate living support facilities to provide workers with a wide range of social services, including medical care, education for their children, recreation and leisure. As part of the new government’s political commitment, the village was not only considered a public housing project, but was also given the expectation of demonstrating the achievements of socialist urban construction and the advancement of collectivism life and life-style. During the 1950s-1970s period, China’s urban residents were tightly organized through *Danwei*¹¹ for production and living, and were consciously led to a collectivized life¹². The workers’ village, as a residence for the largest urban population of industrial workers at that time, and the most typical *Danwei* community, built a medium-sized or small society with collectivity at its core¹³, based on the overlay of political, work and neighbourhood relations to which they belonged¹⁴.

The Northeast China (NEC) is the industrial capital of the new China and is known as the Eldest Son of the Republic. More than one-third of the “156 key projects” were located in NEC, resulting in a large number of constructed workers’ villages. The nationwide economic reform that began in the late 1970s and the urban housing reform that began in the 1990s hit NEC harshly, and a lot of villages were demolished in the urban renewal process. However, even in the leftover workers’ villages, the residents’ identity have changed drastically, and the former collective way of life has gradually disappeared. We are curious about how these spaces that were designed to support collective life are now being used (or neglected), what their value is in the contemporary context, and how we can use these values to re-energize communities. Examining how collectivism was imagined and constructed in the 1950s-70s workers’ village from a historical perspective is necessary for urban heritage preservation and community revitalization today: how was the collective life reflected in the original design of the workers’ village? How was the housing distributed and managed, and did it follow the principles of collectivism? Did the workers/residents indeed live a collective life in their daily use as expected?

COLLECTIVIZATION OF LIVING SPACE

The relationship between the workers’ village and the city is determined by the location of the factory, which is usually positioned on the edge of the city or far from it. In the open spaces away from the city centre, the new regime found that they could create better the ideal living space for the new people, establishing new norms of life towards, ultimately, a communist society. The distance of the village from the city makes it difficult for its inhabitants to use the city’s infrastructure and social services, and the village was initially designed to provide a wide range of social and collective facilities and spaces, with almost all services available to the inhabitants from birth to death¹⁵. The close spatial connection between the living and production areas facilitates commuting, while blurring the boundaries between work and rest, production space and living space, making the *factory as home* and *work first, live later* trend¹⁶.



Fig. 1. "Getting organised is boundlessly good, Collective life brings a lot of happiness" from a Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) 大跃进 poster, designed by Lu Xingchen, et.al. 1960.5.

In NEC, workers' villages were planned according to the Soviet Big Block planning theory. A village consists of several to dozens of rectangular blocks. The blocks has a strong axis, and the 3-, 4-, 5-storey apartments/dormitories are arranged along the street, with both north-south and east-west directions, and in the middle of the courtyard is a recreational green space. A large number of collective facilities and collective spaces are arranged between different blocks. In taking the example of Tiexi Workers' Village one can read in the *Historical accounts of past events in Tiexi*: "In order to facilitate the life of local residents, a comprehensive large store was built in the area at the same time as the construction of the village. This supporting facility was officially operated in 1953. The store was more than 700 m² in total. In the middle is a compound and warehouse, in the east is a grain station, in the west sells vegetables and fish, in the north sells cooked food, and in the south is a restaurant and photo studio. All of the store's businesses are linked to people's lives, and residents can purchase daily necessities here without leaving the village. At that time there were more than 500 salesmen, serving more than 3,400 households around more than 10,000 people"¹⁷; The post office was established in 1955, is an 800 m² of two-story small building, there are more than 50 employees¹⁸; The first elementary school and the first kindergarten in the village were established in 1955 and 1957 respectively; From 1949 to 1988, there were more than 80 cultural palaces (buildings where performance and movies could be held) in the village... The widely distributed collective facilities provided spatial and functional opportunities for the users (workers/residents) to interact with each other and organize collective activities, and strengthened their sense of identity as a collective when facing the outsiders.

In terms of internal space design, workers' villages widely adopted the Soviet Standard Design approach. The low standards applied in times of economic hardship allow for the sharing of living facilities (such as kitchens and toilets) through the compression of individual space, thus promoting collective lifestyle¹⁹. Before the urban housing reform (privatization of public housing) in the 1990s, almost all apartment suite in workers' villages were shared by several families, each occupying one or two bedrooms, with shared kitchens, toilets, and corridors. In addition to the family apartments, a more collective type is the single dormitory. While single dormitories do not differ from family apartments in appearance, the internal spatial organization is very different. The dormitory floor plan usually consisted of a wide corridor in the middle and a dozen less than 20 m² rooms on both sides of the corridor, most of which were bedrooms, with public toilets and public kitchens in every few bedrooms, and some dormitory floors were equipped with activity rooms for study and recreation for the residents of the building. However, as a large number of young singles got married and gave birth in the 1960s, and there was a serious shortage of housing supply, the original single dormitories became family dormitories - one family per bedroom, and the limited interior space could not carry all the family functions, so the private space spilled over, and storage, cooking, and resting were forced to move to the wide corridor. Former activity rooms and even stairwells have been converted into bedrooms for families to live in.

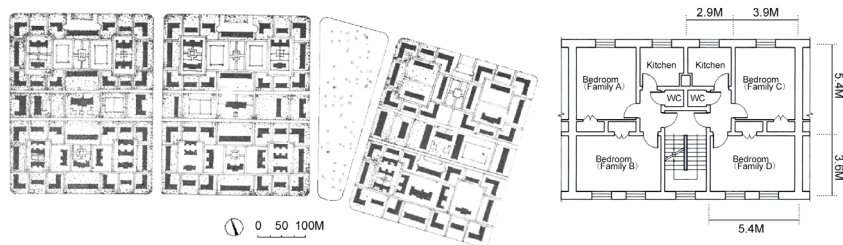


Fig. 2. Tiexi Workers' Village. Top: aerial view. Bottom left: residential planning; bottom right: floor plan of a standard apartment, showing supposed one-family suite shared by two families

HOUSING DISTRIBUTION AND ADMINISTRATION

Under the planned economy, housing was regarded as a kind of welfare, rather than a marketable commodity. Housing belonged to the state and residents only had the right of use when they were linked to the factory. The monthly rent was negligible. When the workers' village was just built, the limited number and area of housing could not satisfy everyone's needs, so the model workers and factory leaders were given priority in the allocation of buildings, while others lived in humble temporary bungalows. According to Zhang's recollection²⁰, (Tiexi Workers' Village) at first only factory cadres, engineers, and model workers were eligible to live there. In the Longfeng Coal Mine workers' village, the only three family apartments were called Model Housings by locals because they were occupied by model workers and their families²¹. Since the early residents' identity, with high self-moral demands and a strong belief in communism and collectivism, some at first refused to accept the brand-new apartments even when they were assigned to them, and offered to give them to colleagues in greater need, or switched the large bedrooms they were assigned to with ones who had larger families. "Li, an eighth-grade caster at the Shenyang Smelter, was allocated a large bedroom in a two-room

suite in Tiexi Workers' Village in 1957. At that time a suite was shared by two families, each one occupying a bedroom. Because his neighbour had a bigger family population but in a small bedroom, Li decided to switch their rooms, and still paid the room fee according to the big room."²² For workers who were temporarily not assigned housing and who joined the factory later, the cadre of general affairs of their workshop was responsible for negotiating with the real estate section of the factory administration office to apply housing for them, but the process was usually not smooth due to the shortage of housing. The real estate section usually had a list of requests for housing, and when new housing was built or vacancies became available, the workers on the list were assigned housing in order from top to bottom. As for the order of the names on the list, it is not exactly according to the early or late demand for housing, but also accompanied by the comprehensive evaluation of the real estate section and the worker's position, the urgency of the demand, work performance, daily performance and other factors. Meerovich's study²³ of the Soviet Union shows that the housing allocation policy for Soviet citizens, while ostensibly claiming to be progressive and egalitarian, was in fact more than an attempt to integrate workers into "labour-life communities"; it was a shadowy political manipulation. The "scarcity" of housing became a necessary tool in order to match certain better (or worse) accommodations to workers. Being allocated extra "living space" was seen as the best proof of allegiance to the state. In China's factories in the 1950s and 1970s, "allegiance to the state" was manifested in the form of allegiance to factory cadres. In this kind of gesture, personal bond between certain individuals and leaders was formed. Another initiative that brought production and livelihood firmly together was the signing of collective contracts²⁴ in the 1950s. Through collective contracts, factories proposed production goals to workers, and labour unions proposed benefits (including housing, collective facilities, higher wages, etc.) on behalf of workers for meeting or exceeding the goals, and workers were thus greatly motivated to produce. The state-owned-factories in NEC were the first to sign collective contracts. As the national newspaper Workers' Daily (1953.1.10) described, "the collective contracts in the factories and mines have implemented the policy of integrating production, life, and education into a whole; through the discussion and signing of collective contracts, the leadership and workers have been closely integrated, and the forces of the enterprise have been organized, and, as a result, achievements have been made... One of the achievements was the improvement of collective welfare and working conditions, such as the construction of a new large canteen and new collective dormitories for workers."²⁵ Theoretically the collective contract approach is in line with the doctrine of the Soviet educator Makarenko. According to him, the collective is not formed spontaneously, but the development of the collective requires "demands and prospects": first the organizer (the factory) puts forward firm demands (production tasks), then there is the support of the activists in the collective (all workers), which becomes the core of the collective (the labour union), then it becomes the common collective demands, and after the demands are fulfilled the prospect (workers' welfare) is then fulfilled²⁶.

In the day-to-day management of the workers' village, households were organized at different levels of collectives. In Tiexi Workers' Village, for example, the highest management body is the Workers' Village Subdistrict Office, which has a number of residents' committees, each of which is responsible for a block. The residents' committee has a secretary, a women's di-

rector, a security director, a sanitation director, and a mediation director. In this way, each resident was included, and individual interests were intertwined with the interests of others, whether by action or expression, or by receiving criticism and awards, the residents always appeared as a collective. On the other hand, the state communicates its decrees to citizens through grassroots organizations, and ordinary residents have a way to communicate upward. Although grassroots governance in China's cities today has changed somewhat from the way it was 70 years ago, this structure is almost inherited today, when the vast majority of urban residents live in commercial estates.

COLLECTIVISM IN DAILY LIFE

Collectivism in everyday life was mainly realized through organized collective activities and spontaneous neighbourhood interactions. In old days, collective activities were numerous, mainly in the form of political study, collective labour, cultural activities, and sports activities. In Anshan Steelworks, it carried out a wide range of collective activities in its workers' village, including organizing its own sports teams, singing and dancing teams, regularly showing movies in the village, establishing amateur technician schools and holding study classes, etc. In Tiexi Workers' Village, "Sometimes a factory would come to the village to show open-air movies in the compound. Whenever this happened, children would run around as if it were a festival, and adults would make dinner early, and after eating, people would gather in front of the big white cloth with their own small benches."²⁷ Some villages also keep a record of their activities and establish their own festivals, with a view to foster a collective tradition. A few of the more famous villages also had the task of presenting themselves to the outside world, and by hosting visiting groups from home and abroad, they were able to strengthen the identity of the local population as a whole. During Mao's era, China excelled at mobilizing the masses in the form of "campaigns" to achieve its goals and educate its people. Take the Patriotic Sanitation Campaign in 1952 as an example²⁸, the following collective activities were carried out in the workers' villages: 1) Propaganda and education: organizing sanitation exhibitions; organizing tours and inspections, and launching propaganda among the residents by means of Q&A. 2) Establishing organizations and training cadres: setting up a set of special organization among the families, such as Patriotic Sanitation Committees, with dedicated leaders in charge, and with sub-teams, such as weed control teams and mosquito eradication teams. 3) Competition: In this way, people's wisdom is mobilized and they actively study ways to improve sanitation. 4) Organizing mutual help: for families who are unable to participate in sanitation activities because they have little children or elders, the committee will organize neighbours to help them. According to the theory of collective action, the key to a collective's ability to pursue its common interests lies in the ability of its members to organize themselves²⁹, and "educating the individual in and through the collective" is also a principle of communist education³⁰.

Collectivism based on personal relationships in daily life was reflected in the mutual assistance of neighbours, which was very common in the early workers' village. Whether it was two families living in the same suite, sharing a kitchen and toilet, or neighbours in the same

building or even the same block, village, the mutual penetration of each other's lives was quite serious, which on the one hand the help of neighbours can also solve some small difficulties in reality, and on the other hand, shaped a strong collectivity and made the residents have a sense of belonging. Zhang recalls, "My family lived in (Tiexi Workers' Village) Apartment No.64, together with 58 families, all of whom I knew. At that time, kitchens and toilets were shared by two families, and two families cooked and washed in one kitchen and used one gas meter. At the end of the month, the people who collected the water and electricity bills copied the figures to the people in the building, and each family took turns to collect the water and electricity bills. The water bill is shared equally by each person, and the electricity bill is calculated according to the number of light bulbs in each room. All the families treated each other honestly, there was no under-reporting or concealment... If one forgot to collect the clothes hung outside in the wind or rain or at night, did not have to worry at all, someone would take them back for you."³¹ Referring to Ujssin's comments³² on Soviet collective dormitories, we can similarly consider the Chinese workers' village as a school that creates collective emotions and eradicates selfish indifference, that teaches how to get along with people, how to struggle with oneself, and how to cultivate comradeship, and that is seen as a valuable experience by those who have lived there.



Fig. 3. Collective activities in workers' villages during 1950s-70s. a: legal institution publicity vehicle; b: self-organized newspaper reading group by workers' wives; c: collective cleaning labour; d: gathering and gossip in a summer evening



Fig. 4. Continuation of the collective lifestyle. Left: industrial workers' physical exercise break in a factory, 1950s-70s; right: spontaneous senior citizens' (mainly retired industrial workers) everyday exercise after dinner in their workers' village, 2020

CONCLUSION

New China under the leadership of CCP has rapidly established a socialist system since the 1950s through an all-round imitation of the Soviet model. Collectivism, as the moral principle of the proletariat, was instilled in all people from the very beginning of the country's founding; with Mao's affirmation in August 1958, Urban People's Communes spread throughout the country in only two years, becoming the climax of collectivist life for urban residents; the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-76) was the period when Mao expressed collectivism and egalitarianism in his unique way, but the consequences of the ten-year Revolution ran counter to these values; Mao died in 1976, and his successor Deng Xiaoping officially took power two years later. The new leader focused more on the economy than on ideology, and began to implement a new policy of Internal Reform and External Opening. Based on the analysis in this paper, we argue that collectivism in China from the 1950s to the 1970s was a highly domesticated, top-down collectivism. The new regime consciously guided the workers to live a collective life, as evidenced by the village location, residential planning, and housing design. The principles of collectivism and egalitarianism were widely applied in the distribution and management of housing, and residents were absorbed into different levels of collectives. In addition to the large number of officially organized collective activities, the leaders at each level also organized collective mutual aid on their own. The daily neighbourhood interactions necessitated by the limited private space and the overlapping of auxiliary spaces, and the spontaneous acts of help due to the belief in communism are vivid expressions of collectivism at the individual level.

As Triandis asserts³³, China's transition from a planned economy to a market economy was accompanied by a shift from collectivism culture to individualism culture. Older people miss what they see as the good old days of "all for one and one for all" and lament the selfishness and indifference of today's society. They feel a sense of loss over the shortfall of collectivism.

But in fact, just as China has not fully realized the market economy, collectivism has not completely disappeared. In Mao's China, the city was a patchwork of almost self-sufficient unitary communities, whether factories, universities, or the military, which managed their own workers and families both at the workplace and at the place of living, and all the city needed to provide was a place and limited social services. In today's society, a few *Danwei* communities still exist, although they are very different from before, and the vast majority of urban residents live in commercial housing estates that they have purchased, while the slightly better ones are gated communities, from which we can clearly see the role of collectivism in shaping urban space. On the other hand, the grassroots management system in the city seems to have changed even less, and the "paternalistic" governance, layer by layer, reflects the accountability of the government and facilitates the control of the party over the people. If we take into account the ongoing pandemic, with its long history of collectivism education and strict urban management, we seem to understand why China is the only country in the world that can quickly lockdown a city of millions or tens of millions and still maintain a zero-Covid strategy.

The workers' villages in NEC are the most characteristic urban legacy of China's 1950s-70s, which not only once shaped collective life spatially, but also served as the most precious material carriers of the collectivism spirit of the past era. In today's workers' village, there are still a group of old workers living there. Most of them are the second generation of workers' village, who inherited the apartments along with their parents' job, and are full of feelings and strong sense of identification with the factory and village. In their words and behaviours, we can clearly see the brand of collectivism laid down by them. For middle-aged and young people, although the concept of collectivism may seem vague, the education of "collective, teamwork, dedication, and selflessness" from family, school, and society since childhood makes most of them feel the same way, and all these can be linked to the collectivism of 1950s-70s. It can be said that without understanding the history of collectivism and collective life, it is impossible to truly understand the urban space and social governance in China today.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR(S)

Yiping Zhang is a PhD candidate in KU Leuven. His research interest mainly lies in urban planning history, industrial heritage, collective spaces, and community regeneration.

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12. According to Sam Jacoby's research, although collectivized living was not pioneered by the Soviet Union, collectivization in China was largely learned from the Soviet Union. The Soviet concept of collectivized living began in the 1930s and was characterized by a collective deconstruction of the traditional bourgeois house in terms of spatial organization by minimizing the individual private dwelling unit while maximizing the communal functions shared by all other collectives, with the aim of producing a socialist lifestyle. Sam Jacoby, Cheng Cyan Jingru, *Collective forms in China: People's commune and Danwei* 中国集体形制—人民公社与单位. *New Architecture* 新建筑2018 (5): 6; Dluhosch, Eric, and Karel Teige. *The Minimum Dwelling*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).
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