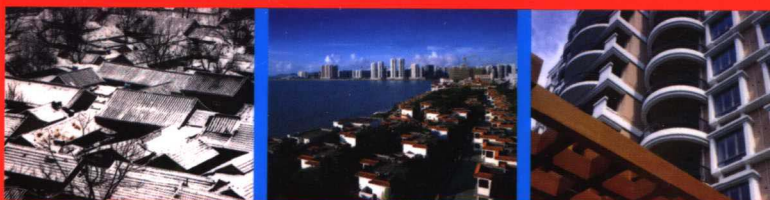


时尚中国

FASHION CHINA



# *Living in China*



CHINA  
INTERCONTINENTAL  
PRESS

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**Fashion China**

# **Living in China**

Written by Xia Jun & Yin Shan

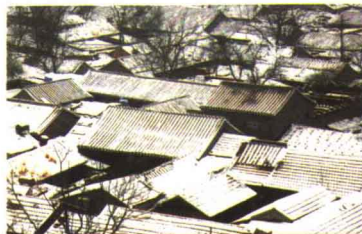
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# Preface

Chinese are always moving.

In the absence of any official statistics, it is difficult to say how many moves take place in China every year.

Since the country started down the path of reform and opening-up nearly 30 years ago, tens of millions of Chinese have moved.

Some people moved from the countryside to cities, while others moved from cities to the countryside. Some moved from small houses to big ones, while others moved from big houses to small ones. These moves have brought happiness, hard work and even worries.

Moving in China is not just a simple question of changing a residence. No other country in the world is like China. No other country has undergone such great changes in such a short time. The country is changing; the society is changing; people's points of view are changing. It is only natural that they should also change residences, and be changed in turn by the experience.

In the last 20 years of brought the 20<sup>th</sup> century, all Chinese became familiar with the deep changes brought by reform. Urban residents soon grew accustomed to the fast pace of change. In fact, it is doubtful many of them will ever again experience as much surprise and excitement as they did at the beginning of the process.

During those 20 years, cranes, excavators and construction workers became common sights in the more than 600 cities and 20,000 towns of China. From the residential reforms of the 1990s aimed at improving people's basic living conditions to the current trend of using urban planning to improve the residential environment of whole cities, China has become one huge construction site. Rows of old houses have been demolished and modern skyscrapers have risen in their place. Nobody knows how many old houses were pulled down in those two decades, or how many new houses

were built.

The per capita living area of Chinese urbanites in 1978 was only 3.6 square meters. In 2005, it reached 26.11 square meters. The per family residential construction area in cities was 83.2 square meters. Chinese media described the change as nothing short of historic breakthrough. The increased amount of space symbolized the end of an era of scarcity and the dawn of one of comfort.

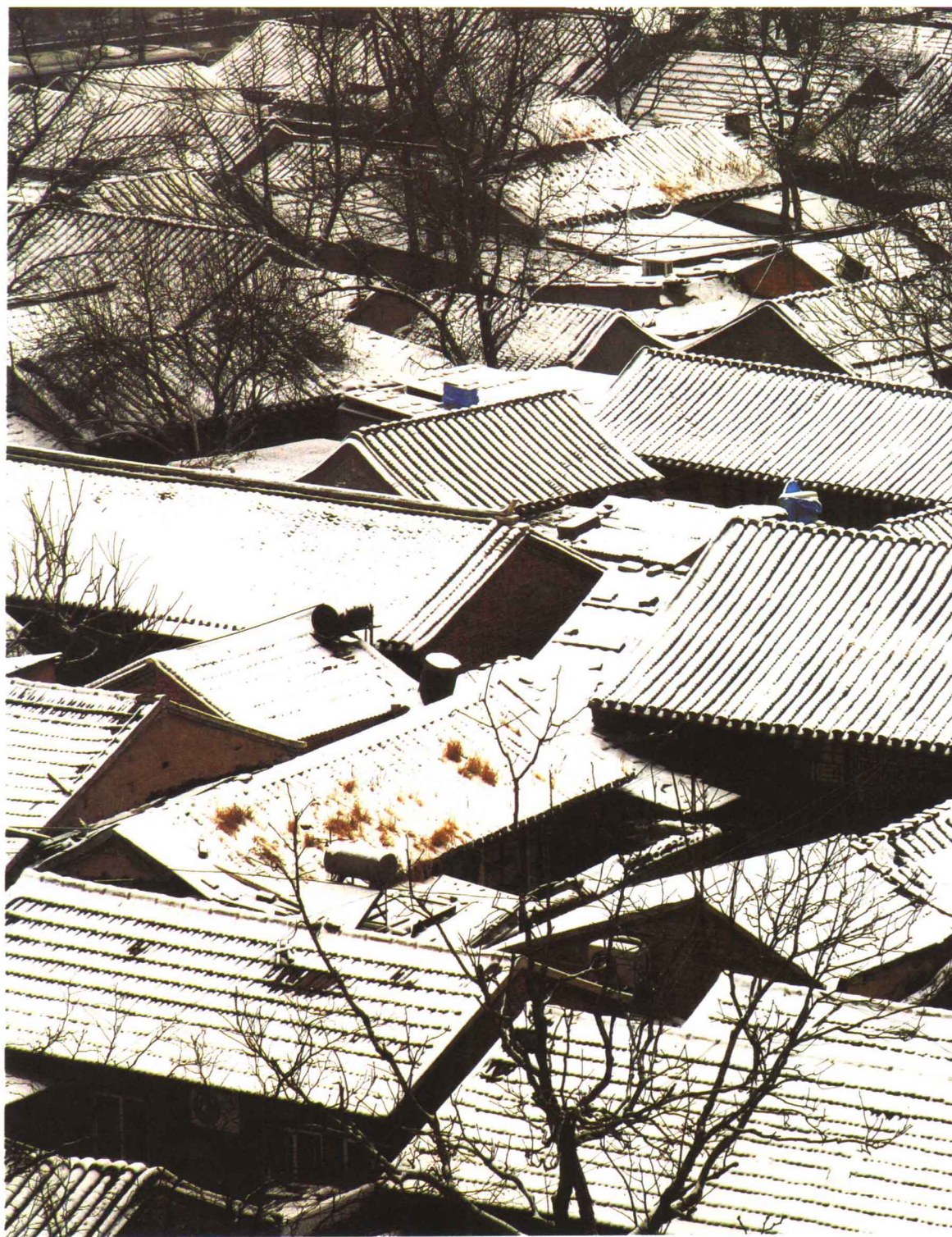
UN-HABITAT Deputy Executive Director Daniel Biau said China has made great progress in solving the shortage of housing for low-income people. The pace of construction in China was the fastest in the world over the past six years. Statistics from China's construction department show that 81.62 percent of Chinese urban residents owned their houses in 2005.

In addition to the fast pace of construction and the world's highest rate of home ownership, China can also boast an unprecedented poverty-relief effort: More than 100 million Chinese have become medium-income earners over the past 20 years.

Old-style residential compounds, tube-shaped buildings and uniform apartment blocks now share the market with individualized apartments and Town Houses. In the past, a single house would be passed down through several generations. Now it is common for people to buy second homes, even in other cities. Chinese people's expectations of their accommodations have shifted from livable to comfortable and beautiful. From shed to apartment to house, residences now represent more than just a place to rest. They have been endowed with more spiritual and emotional meanings.

Ancient towns have developed into new cities. Neighborhood committees have become residential communities. People without property now own property. A society of acquaintances has become one of strangers. As China's ideas about residences have changed, so has Chinese society.

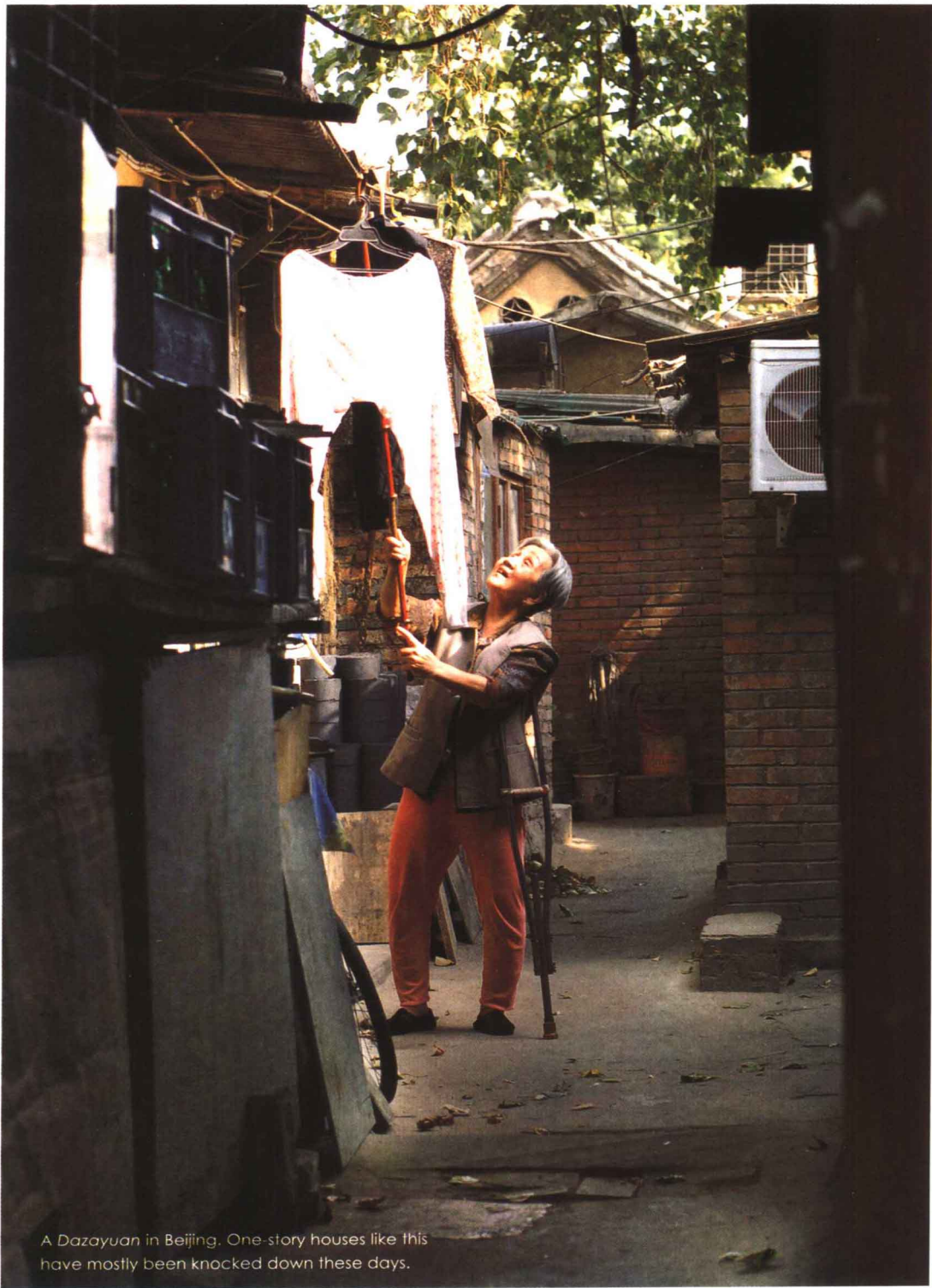








# **Memories of Old Residences**



A Dazayuan in Beijing. One-story houses like this have mostly been knocked down these days.

**F**rom the 1950s to the mid-1980s, the average amount of per capita residential space available to Chinese urbanites was less than 10 square meters, which was rare in the world. The people, living in small and similar houses, had no dreams of luxury so long as their basic needs were met.

To many people, ideas of home were closely linked with one's work unit. At that time, people's lives revolved around their work unit, while those with no unit affiliation were regarded as loafers. People depended on their units not only to make a living, but also to gain access to a small house. At that time, most urban residents lived in work dormitories that were allocated according to position and seniority. The situation was so stable that people dared not imagine what it would be like to arrange their own accommodations.

The residential compounds, stone-arched houses, tube-shaped buildings and old apartments once familiar to all Chinese people are now giving way to glimmering new cities. The physical remains of the old life may be fading, but the memories linger.



# ***Dazayuan***

## **(Residential Compound)**

**T**he word *Dazayuan* emerged in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Literally, it means big, messy compound. *Dazayuan* can be found in many Chinese cities, though they are concentrated in the north, with those in the capital city Beijing being the most typical. Most Beijingers made their homes in *Dazayuan* over the past half-century.

Beijing's earliest *Dazayuan* appeared in the suburbs. At that time, poor people used broken bricks and tiles to build small houses at the foot of the city walls. These humble dwellings were just enough to protect them from wind and rain. The first *Dazayuan* was born when many such houses were connected. Few of these residential compounds exist now, and most remaining *Dazayuan* compounds can be found in alleys. The most well-known style of alley residence in Beijing is the *Siheyuan*, or quadrangle. Actually, most *Dazayuan* compounds were converted *Siheyuan* that were originally occupied by one family. However, with Beijing's

population increasing year by year starting in the 1950s, the one-household quadrangles were not up to the task of meeting the city's housing needs. Single-family compounds were suddenly crammed with several or even dozens of families. This type of *Dazayuan* is the one most people remember.

Some families in these residential compounds had two or three houses,

Beijing's Hutong (alleyway)







Scenes inside a Dazayuan

while some had only one. The families were all different sizes, from single to three or four generations. They included babies, children and teenagers as well as middle-aged and elderly people, all living together. They had different occupations, different living habits and different diets.

Traditionally, Chinese place a premium on neighborhood relationships.

An old saying has it that “a close neighbor means more than a distant relative.” This concept, passed on for generations, was given its fullest expression in the *Dazayuan*. Everyone living in *Dazayuan* used the same small coal ovens to cook. If the fire went out at night, lighting it was the first thing people did when they woke up in the morning. Winter would be easy because people would bring their ovens inside to keep warm. In summer, each household kept its oven outside, and the courtyard would be very hot. But to residents of *Dazayuan*, this was life. When it was time to eat, the air grew heavy with the smell of cooking food. The neighbors would ask each other: “What do you have today?” If someone made a particularly delicious dish, his first thought would be to take some to the neighbors to let their kids have a taste. It seemed to be an unwritten rule. Most children growing up in *Dazayuan* found themselves regularly treated to neighbors’ delicacies.

Zhang Yu grew up in Beijing’s Nanheyan Alley. Zhang said: “I remember when we were young, the kids living in the compound would always run around in the courtyard. There were two thick iron wires linking the northern house and the southern one, which residents used to sun their clothes. If the weather was good, people would hang out their quilts. And that became the children’s playground. We would run after each other between the quilts. Children who grew up playing together in the same residential compound had very good relations. Sometimes we felt like brothers and sisters.”

But not all the memories from the *Dazayuan* are so nice. An author described the life in *Dazayuan* thusly: “To say nothing of the dirtiness, disorder and shabbiness of *Dazayuan*, the sounds of the chattering neighbors cut



People live in *Dazayuan* are accustomed to make full use of every inch of the space.

through the air. They breathed out gusts of garlic, pepper, vinegar and soy sauce, and the smells mixed together in the air. The residents of *Dazayuan* were mediocre and vulgar. They ate homely food, so their breath had a homely smell. It was so boring that you would be fed up with it as soon as you smelt it. It was impossible to smell a delicate fragrance in such a place. At that time, people living in apartment buildings were very haughty, and they considered the people living in *Dazayuan* to be philistines, with low so-

cial status.”

Residents of *Dazayuan* came from everywhere. They had various jobs, diverse characters and different educational backgrounds, and as a result they had different ideas about morals. Moreover, the residential compounds were too small to ensure residents’ privacy. Disputes were inevitable. In such a situation, people who lived together for many years had to adapt a certain amount of tolerance and forbearance. Writer Wang Zengqi wrote in an article entitled “Alley Culture” that tolerance is the quintessence of Beijing alley culture. Abiding by the law, behaving oneself and meekly submitting to op-



pression and maltreatment were a way of life for most residents of residential compounds in Beijing alleys.

As dangerous and old houses are rebuilt, *Dazayuan* will eventually become historical relics, the culture these residents spawned will not be forgotten by history or by the people who lived it.

A narrow Hutong

