

Back when the Comrade was a wee urchin, we didn't even have the word "Real Estate," much less our own pot to squat on. The only "personal property" we owned was our underwear and wooden teeth. Everything else was considered 公共财产 gōng gòng cái chǎn (public property). But thanks to Deng Xiaoping and The Reform and Opening Up, now any Chinese 公民 gōng mǐn (citizen) can buy his or her own apartment (if they happen to be among the .01 percent of the population that can afford it).

Before pontificating about the various housing options available in the PRC, the Comrade would like to clear up some linguistic ambiguities related to 建筑物 jiàn zhù wù (architecture) with Chinese characteristics. The words 大厦 dà shà and 大楼 dà lóu both refer to high-rises, the tallest of which are called 摩天大楼 mó tiān dà lóu (lit. "skyscraper"). 办公楼 Bàn gōng lóu means "office building," while 居民楼 jū mǐn lóu means "apartment building." Then there are the various phylum of 居民楼 jū mǐn lóu, which include 公房 gōng fáng or the more upscale 小高层 xiǎo gāo céng, which are usually short structures of about six stories. 楼房 Lóu fáng, or the higher-class 公寓房 gōng yù fáng are at least ten storeys or more. Last but not least are the 四合院 sì hé yuàn, or traditional Beijing courtyard homes.

Of course, the reason you came to China will always

have the greatest influence on where you live. Unless you reside in your country's 大使馆 dà shǐ guǎn (embassy), chances are you'll end up in one of the following:

### 宾馆 Bīn Guǎn (Hotels)

There are two kinds of hotels in China: those that do accept foreigners (对外 duì wài) and those that don't (不对外 bú duì wài). The general rule is: hotels that accept foreign guests are the expensive ones. Tourists are often baffled to learn that they'll pay almost the same prices to stay in a big, international hotel in Beijing that they would in New York, London, Paris or Rome. (Yeah, but which of those cities can boast five thousand years of culture and tradition?)

Most 星级 xīng jí bīn guǎn (star-rated hotels) offer long-term rooms in addition to standard rooms and suites. Foreign companies fork out big bucks to protect their expats from the horrors of the real world by putting them up in expensive hotels. The obvious benefit to living in a hotel (besides 卫星电视 wèi xīng diàn shì - cable TV) is that you never have to worry about things like cooking, cleaning, mailing letters, paying bills, doing laundry, etc. The drawback is that with all of those pesky chores out of the way your company expects you to work like a 奴隶 nú lì (slave). You end up so busy that you have to tote your laptop computer into the bathroom with you when you take a dump. Another annoyance is that your Chinese friends (if you have any)

will probably have to 登记 dēng jì (register) before they're allowed to visit you, and will be asked to leave before midnight - 为了您的安全 wèi le nín de rǎn quán ("for your own good").

### 宿舍 Sù Shè (Dormitories)

If you're a student, then dormitories are a 明显 míng xiǎn (obvious) and probably 惟一的 wéi yí de (singular) housing solution. In addition to long- and short-term dorms, most big college campuses in China also offer a separate space or facility for 外国专家 wài guó zhūn jiā (foreign experts). Note that the title "foreign expert" is used quite liberally in China, and can be used interchangeably with the word 老外 lǎo wài, with which it is synonymous.

If you intend to live in one of these places, be prepared. You will be woken up every morning (including Saturdays) at about 5:30 a.m. by ubiquitous campus speakers blasting the 国歌 guó gē (national anthem - the rousing "March of the Volunteers") and morning exercise instructions. Rooms are small and hot water and electricity are unreliable at best. Chinese visitors will be interrogated by wicked 服务员 fú wù yuán (dormstaff), forced to either register or leave and will be thrown out before midnight. While these facilities are cheap, it doesn't make much sense to live in them unless you're working for the school. The reason is simple: you'd need to speak a certain amount of Chinese to get by in a foreign expert facility. If you speak the requisite

Chinese, then why not get a real job and move into a decent apartment?

外交公寓 Wàijiāo Gōng yù (Foreign Diplomatic Housing Apartment Complexes)

The earliest and most well-known foreign housing apartment complex in Beijing is the - 建国门外交公寓 Jiànguó mén Wàijiāo Gōng yù (Jianguomen Foreign Diplomat Apartments). It's a great place to live if you don't mind 种族隔离 zhǎng zú gé lí (racial segregation). Nowadays there are foreign housing apartment complexes springing up all over the city, and they aren't just for diplomats or journalists anymore - they're for anyone with money to burn!

Foreign diplomatic or service housing complexes are usually well situated and offer ample space compared to Chinese housing, hotels and foreign expert facilities. On the other side of the coin, they are expensive and trees, grass and shrubs are about as scarce as a 流浪狗 liú làng gǒu (stray dogs) in Chinatown. Instead you'd better get used to concrete, glass and steel. Imposing iron gates with sharpened points or concrete walls with protruding shards of glass at the top surround many foreign service apartment complexes, making you wonder if that's to keep the riff raff out, or to keep you in. It's likely that the only Chinese person you'll ever be on a first name basis with during your stint in one of these places is the guard at the front gate. Expats who have done time in a 监狱 jiān yù (prison) may appreciate life in a foreign

diplomatic or service housing complex.

别墅 Bié Shù (Villa Homes)

If you think "conveniently located" means 30 kilometers outside the city and "affordable prices" means paying more in a 发展中国家 fā zhǎn zhōng guó jì (developing country) than you would in the First World, then these villas are for you. It is generally understood that big multinational companies are the only ones actually paying for these homes. You'd have to be crazy (or a rich 华侨 huá qiáo - overseas Chinese, or a 同胞 tóng bào - compatriot from Hong Kong or Taiwan) to buy one of these places as an "investment" or pay the rent out of your own pocket. These homes are ideal for expats who want to fool themselves into thinking they're not in China. Accommodations are small by Western standards, but communal "yards" and "playgrounds" afford a place for the kids to play without getting run over by a bicycle or hit by garbage thrown from an apartment window. Make sure your company provides you with a car and/or driver if they expect you to live in the boonies. You'll need them.

中国人的房子 Zhōng guó rén de Fáng zi (Chinese Housing)

旅游者 Lú yóu kè (tourists) may be interested to know that for the same amount of money you spend on two nights at the Hilton Hotel, you could live for a month in a brand-new, furnished Chinese apartment. More and more Chinese-speaking foreigners are opting to take the

plunge and live among the Chinese 老百姓 lǎo bǎi xìng (common folk) in Chinese housing. Chinese apartments come in all shapes and sizes and usually come reasonably (if not tastefully) furnished. Typical drawbacks include unreliable plumbing and wiring.

Finding a Chinese apartment used to be done largely by word-of-mouth. That was until Chinese real estate agents realized there was more money to be made helping laowai find apartments than locals. Real estate agents generally take anywhere from half a month's rent to a full month's rent as 中介费 zhōng jiè fèi (lit. "middle man fee," or commission). Normally your 房东 fáng dōng (landlord) will ask you to pay anywhere from two to six months' rent at a time as well as at least one or two months' 押金 yā jīn (security deposit). Beware: many 房东 fáng dōng request that rent be paid in US dollars. Make sure you know what you're getting into before you put any money down and sign a 房屋租赁合同 fáng wū zū lìn hé tóng (rental agreement or contract). The real estate agent should help you with that.

Caution: bringing your Chinese 情人 qíng rén (lover) home with you makes you even more noticeable to your curious neighbors. If you've got a Chinese boyfriend you probably won't encounter any problems (unless you are a man), but foreign men will have to be discreet when bringing their Chinese girlfriends home.

Don't forget, you too can be the proud owner of your

very own Chinese apartment! (Ownership terminates after 70 years and apartment becomes property of the State. Other restrictions may apply.)