

**Document 13.4: Excerpts describing urban living arrangements from *Growing Up in the People's Republic: Conversations Between Two Daughters of China's Revolution*, by Ye Weili and Ma Xiaodong, 2005**

*Both Ye Weili and Ma Xiaodong lived in dayuan in Beijing. A dayuan included the work and residential space for a danwei—a work unit. So, for example, all the employees of a government agency, a school, or a state enterprise lived and worked together.*

YE WEILI: I grew up in Xinhua<sup>1</sup> compound in downtown Beijing. The entire compound occupied more than 70 *mu* of land (about 12 acres). It was divided into work and residential areas. When I was small, there was no armed security force guarding the work area as there is today. We children could roam about the entire territory. We often played the game “looking for the arrow,” a sort of hide-and-seek between two groups of kids. It allowed us to explore every corner of the compound. Some areas were no-man’s-land and it was scary to find oneself there alone.... Just as peasants dwell in the same village for all their lives, Xinhua people have lived together for as long as I can remember....

The building where my family lived during the 1950s and early 1960s helped facilitate a sense of community. Constructed in the mid-1950s, it was a four-story building with long and wide hallway on every floor. On both sides of the hallway were two- and three-bedroom units, each with a toilet but no kitchen. The families on the same floor—there were about six or seven units—shared a common kitchen, which was large enough for each household to maintain a coal burning stove, a cabinet, and a small table. The kitchen also served as a common room for neighbors to chat and exchange news although most of the time it was the domain of the domestic helpers. It was not easy to keep family secrets from the neighbors.

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<sup>1</sup> The Chinese government’s official news service; everyone who worked for the news service lived and worked together in the *dayuan*.

I don't know how the adults felt about the closeness of the living arrangement. With hindsight I realize they might not have liked it that much, especially when there was a political campaign going on. After a criticism meeting in the office, they would have wanted to avoid their colleagues in the living quarter and privacy would have been desirable. But for us kids who had little sense of the adult world, this living arrangement was great. Girls tended to stay inside with friends playing house and other domestic games, while boys formed gangs and often ran wild outside fighting in their war games. I don't remember ever hearing any complaints from adults about the boys' behavior. Perhaps it was because all the leaders at Xinhua had children in this age group. When it was dinnertime, you would hear a kid's name being called loudly by a mother or more likely an auntie to go home. Parents knew their children were somewhere in the compound with friends and there was no need to worry.

Without leaving the compound, one could get almost every type of service. The service was not free but it was cheaper than what would have been charged outside. Besides, you also didn't have to wait in long lines. My parents deposited their money at the compound bank and mailed their letters in the compound post office. When I didn't feel well, I would go to the compound clinic. My parents joined a medical program for children so I didn't need to bring any cash with me. I knew every doctor and nurse there and would try to avoid the ones with a poor reputation.

My favorite places were the library and the auditorium. I spent a lot of time in the library, doing homework in the reading room and browsing the many journals and newspapers on the shelves. They came from every province in China and even countries like the Soviet Union and Hungary. I was also able to borrow books from the library, with my mother's card. The auditorium was another memorable place. Almost every Saturday evening a film was shown there free for Xinhua residents. To see a new film with my girl friends was the highlight of the week. Over the years I saw many feature films made both in China and abroad.

MA XIAODONG: There wasn't an auditorium in the compound where we lived. As a matter of fact, most of the facilities you describe didn't exist in ours except for a canteen. We lived in a compound that belonged to your father's work unit. It was a small, strictly residential compound with only four multi-story redbrick buildings. The offices of the ministry were elsewhere. Located within a *hutong*<sup>2</sup>, our compound looked like "a crane standing among chickens." We shopped in the nearby *hutong* and streets because there were no stores in our compound.

Children in the compound also played together. I always went to a girl's home. She had a very pretty elder sister who was an actress. I liked to go to their home just to see the sister. Her eyebrows were long and her eyes were deep and large. She and my brother eventually fell in love and she is now my sister-in-law. I used to call her "gypsy girl" behind her back because I thought she looked like a foreigner. I admired beautiful people. My father once observed that "whenever you see a pretty woman you cannot take your eye off her."

In our compound it was hard to keep secrets. The family living next to us had several children. The father was a well-respected Red Army veteran. All his children were doing well except the youngest one, a daughter. She was pretty and liked to dress differently from other girls. She always wore strikingly bright colors and her clothes were tailored to fit her body. By then a simple lifestyle was being promoted as proletarian, so people like her were seen as pursuing a decadent bourgeois way of life. Later she spent some time in a reform center for delinquent adolescents. Rumor had it that she had gotten into trouble because of "loose behavior." When she came back from the reform center she moved out of her parents' apartment and lived by herself in a small room facing the windows of our apartment. I was curious about her and would sometimes stand by the window to peep, but her door and windows were always shut tight and she never spoke to any neighbors. She still dressed in a manner that provoked frowns. Neighbors remarked in low voices,

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<sup>2</sup> Traditional neighborhood in a Chinese city; a *hutong* typically has narrow alleyways between homes which have courtyards in the center and are surrounded by walls.

“Look at her. How disgusting!” Everybody’s behavior was under public scrutiny. This was a characteristic of compound life.

I also remember some old residents such as a retired man who lived in our building. He had participated in the Long March and therefore was a big hero in our eyes. He regularly cleaned the banisters of the staircase in our building. Once I watched him doing it: he walked very slowly, one step at a time, carefully dusting the banisters. He did it voluntarily, which made me respect him even more.

The best known person in our compound was Uncle Li who worked at the reception room. His job also included cleaning the yard and delivering phone messages. Since most residents in the compound didn’t have telephones at home, the phone in the reception room was very busy. Uncle Li’s trademark was his resounding voice. Our compound had almost 200 households and Uncle Li knew every family by heart. When a phone call came for someone, he would walk to the right building and call up to the person. Every word was clearly pronounced and the sound echoed throughout the entire compound.

Uncle Li didn’t get married until his sixties. When the news came out everyone felt happy for him. Many people bought presents. After his marriage his salary was no longer sufficient. Somebody suggested that each family add one or two *jiao* (ten *fen* makes one *jiao*) to their monthly fee for Uncle Li’s cleaning. People agreed that it would be very little for each family but could make a big difference for Uncle Li.

Since his small two-room residence was just opposite our apartment, my family had an especially close relationship with Uncle Li. Every time I went out I had to pass his home and I must have greeted him thousands of times. In the early 1980s my family purchased a refrigerator, a rarity at the time. One day Uncle Li asked my parents if he could put a fish in the freezer for a long time, perhaps over two months. One day my big elder brother said that Uncle Li must have forgotten his fish and we should remind him. My father replied, “No, he didn’t forget. He is saving it for a special occasion. Let’s leave it there.” My father was right: Uncle Li came to get his fish one day.

YE WEILI: Were cadres expected to respect working-class people in those days? I remember a wall poster by the chefs at Xinhua canteen. It was posted in an area where people put wall posters to voice their grievances and draw attention to issues of public concern. This particular poster criticized a cadre for defending his son who had been rude to chefs. Many people wrote in response to criticize the cadre. In the end that man had to apologize. I remember this incident well because I disliked his son very much. He was a spoiled brat....

MA XIAODONG: Your playmates all seemed to be kids from Xinhua. Our compound was located in an alleyway, so many of my friends were from *hutong*. After school we often played together. I visited some of my friends' homes and was surprised to see how small and crowded they were. The ceilings were low and the rooms were dark. There was no indoor plumbing or toilets.

A different kind of family also lived in *hutong*. Once I was invited to visit a classmate's home. The girl warned me beforehand not to speak in a loud voice. Her family resided in a well-maintained large courtyard house with all the modern facilities. The rooms were tall and spacious, furnished with hardwood furniture in traditional style. I watched my every move and was nervous that I might break something. In one room I saw an elderly lady sitting straight in an elegant chair. She was probably my friend's grandmother. Few old ladies dressed so well those days. She made me think of the wicked landlord's mother in a movie I'd seen. I felt ill at ease and didn't stay long.

YE WEILI: I was not as familiar like you with life in *hutong*. Most of my knowledge about alleyways came from my third (maternal) uncle's home, which was in a typical courtyard in western Beijing. Three other families shared my uncle's courtyard housing. As the landlord, my uncle's family occupied the rooms facing the south, the best side, and the tenant families rented rooms on the other three sides. A huge porcelain fish jar stood in the center of the spacious open yard. I always liked to watch the gold fish swimming. Near my uncle's section there stood two date trees. Every autumn my brother and I

waited anxiously for the sweet and crispy dates from the trees. It felt as if it were in the countryside rather than in the middle of downtown Beijing.

My uncle's courtyard had a different atmosphere from the Xinhua compound. The neighbors greeted each other courteously in accordance with traditional etiquette, unlike in the compound where everybody was supposed to be a fellow comrade. I was not sure if I behaved properly in their eyes.

Source: Ye Weili and Ma Xiaodong. *Growing Up in The People's Republic: Conversations Between Two Daughters of China's Revolution*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 33–37.