Factsheet for teachers: Housing in China

‘Traditional’ (pre-modern) urban housing

• China built cities very early – as long as a thousand years ago. But they look very different from today. They were composed of single-storey housing, usually with tiled roofs, that were densely packed.
• Traditional housing: ‘siheyuan’ or courtyard housing, with houses forming a small courtyard. Sometimes a single household would own all the housing in the courtyard and sometimes more than one family would share it. Courtyards were used flexibly, for growing plants, as a place to relax, for doing household chores.
• ‘Hutong’ in Beijing were the lanes between the old housing. In Shanghai they are called ‘lilong’.

Contemporary urban housing

• There has been a housing boom since housing commercialization in the 1990s. Most housing in the cities was state-owned in the ‘socialist’ period from the 1950s-1970s and into the 1980s. People often lived in housing provided by their employer (e.g. a factory), sometimes on the work place site. Municipal governments owned most of the other housing. But housing conditions were very cramped. Today, for many people, housing conditions are much better – with more space, central heating, etc.
• Nowadays there is thought to be a housing ‘bubble’, with overpriced housing. In cities like Beijing, housing space (calculated in m2) is amongst the most expensive in the world. [More information on this and on contemporary housing development issues in China available on request].
• Cities now include areas known as ‘urban villages’, where former villages have become suburbanized as cities have expanded. Here, farmers have often stopped faming and build housing on their land that is (say) 5-7 storeys high for migrants from rural areas to live in.

Traditional rural housing

• Traditional housing in China was more like the housing in the city: with tiled roofs, often housing was clustered together in villages.
• Courtyard housing was/is also used in the countryside.
• Rich families lived in very large housing complexes were a husband would have several wives/concubines housed in different quarters [see the film Raise the Red Lantern].
• Some people lived (and some people, but fewer, still live) in cave housing. The loess plateau of Shaanxi is particularly known for cave dwellings.
• Traditional (from the Manchu/Qing dynasty) rural (and urban) housing often had heated benches or ‘kang’ made of bricks: they were connected to the fire and so provided heating for the dwelling. A family would sleep and perhaps also eat and sit during the daytime on the kang, especially in winter.

Contemporary rural housing

• In rural areas local governments are often now moving people from more traditional housing into apartment blocks so that land can be sold and used to build factories.
• Vast tracts of rural China are composed of two or three storey houses, often surrounded by fields.