

Goodbye Beijing, hello Ming

Once forced to work in rural labour camps, middle-class Beijingers are now in search of rustic idylls. **Zhang Lijia joins the weekenders**

The bourgeoisie of the People's Republic of China used to loathe the countryside. Millions of urban intellectuals, as well as Mao's Red Guards, were forced to labour with, and learn from, the peasantry. Thirty years on, millions of peasants flood the cities to find work, while the urban elite looks at country living in a new light. "I'd go crazy if I stayed in Beijing all the time," a friend of mine told me. Once banished to rural exile during the Cultural Revolution, he is now the chief executive of a start-up company and also the new owner of an old farmhouse hidden in a mountain valley. "Life is so polluted and fast in the city. I come here to relax and recover."

Framed by hills and history, the outskirts of Beijing attract Chinese desperate to escape the urban grind. Holiday camps and rustic homestays spring up to cash in on trends born of growing affluence and Western-style lifestyle magazines. At the top of the heap is the 'Commune by the Great Wall', an avant-garde villa complex selling at a staggering £300,000 per unit. It is worth bearing in



mind that the average Beijing annual salary is about (£1,100.)

But like increasing numbers of Beijingers, my British husband and I found a little place in the country that cost only a fraction of that price. Cramped inside a city-centre apartment, mobbed by construction clamour on all sides, we set our eyes on the Ming Tombs, the imperial cemetery of 13 Chinese rulers. Less than one hour's drive from downtown, this patchwork of field, forest and orchard has long been a favourite picnic spot.

Over the years, we had befriended Zhang Tong, 75-year-old caretaker of the ruined Siling tomb, the final resting place of the last Ming emperor. Old Zhang gladly began house-hunting for us. Described by him as "beautifully furnished, most suitable for you city folks", his first choice was a hallowed, two-storey, white-tiled building with blue glass. These shiny blue buildings have become the symbol of prosperity across rural China.

Several false alarms later, Old Zhang showed us the empty house of a neighbour who had moved on to better, bluer things. I quickly fell for its slate roof and wooden window frames, with terraces and mountains beyond. In this



“How do you transfer land in a country where it all belongs to the state?”

Country life: clockwise from top left, the Ming Tombs; Zhang Lijia at home with children May and Kirsty; the builders take a break

typical north China house, white paper – not glass – covers most windows. There is a courtyard and large orchard, bursting with apple, apricot and chestnut trees.

At the negotiating table, the owner Mr Yin demanded 50,000 yuan (about £3,600) – 30,000 yuan (£2,310) for the house and another 20,000 (£1,540) for the orchard. We offered 20,000 for the lot. After a few rounds of hard talks, Old Zhang, serving as middleman, brokered a £2,500 deal.

The only question was how to transfer ownership in a country where all land belongs to the state, and legal issues are painful grey. The village chief refused to witness the deal, insisting that farmers are forbidden from selling houses to non-farmers – an apartheid-like divide strictly upheld in official records. However, in China there is always a way.

The chief also suggested that the house could be "rented". Yin drafted a contract for "long-term rental", which I rephrased as "perpetual rental". The simple agreement, contained on one battered sheet of paper, was peppered with scribbles and corrections. "It doesn't look very formal," sighed Old Zhang after we signed. "We've got to have"



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Goodbye Beijing – the middle-class Beijingers are now in search of rustic idylls

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Thirty years on, millions of peasants flood the cities to find work, while the urban elite looks at country living in a new light. "I'd go crazy if I stayed in Beijing all the time," says a friend who was banished to rural exile during the Cultural Revolution. Now the CEO of a start-up company, he is also the new owner of an old farmhouse hidden in a mountain valley. "Life is so polluted and fast paced in the city. I come here to relax and recover."

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But like increasing numbers of Beijingers, my British husband and I found that little place in the country need cost only a fraction of the price. Cramped inside a city center apartment, mobbed by construction clamour on all sides, we set our eyes on the Ming Tombs, the imperial cemetery of 13 Chinese rulers. Under one hour's drive from downtown, this patchwork of field, forest and orchard has long been a favourite picnic spot.

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for us. Described by him as “beautifully furnished, most suitable for you city folks”, his first choice was a hideous two-storey, white-tiled building with blue glass. These shiny blue erections have become the symbol of prosperity across rural China.

Several false alarms later, Old Zhang showed us the empty house of a neighbour who had moved on to better, bluer things. I quickly fell for its slate roof and wooden window frames, with forests and mountains beyond. In this typical north China house, white paper not glass covers most windows. There is a courtyard and large orchard, bursting with apple, apricot and chestnuts trees.

At the negotiation table, the owner Mr Yin demanded 50,000 yuan (3,850 pounds), 30,000 for the house and 20,000 for the orchard. We offered 20,000. After a few rounds of hard talks, Old Zhang, serving as middleman, brokered a 2,500 pounds deal.

The only question was how to transfer ownership in a land where all land belongs to the state, and legal issues are painted grey. The village chief refused to witness the deal, insisting that farmers are forbidden from selling houses to non-farmers – the apartheid-like divide is strictly upheld in official records. However, in China there is always a way. The chief also suggested the house could be rented.

Yin drafted a contract for ‘long term rental’ which I rephrased it as ‘permanent rental’. The simple contract, one battered sheet of paper long, was soon peppered with scribbles and corrections. “It doesn’t look very formal,” sighed Old Zhang after we signed. “We’ve got to have a fingerprint.” He dispatched his wife to borrow some red ink. “Yes, that’s more like it!” Old Zhang said with satisfaction, blowing the paper dry.

The main building was in reasonable condition, and required a lick of paint, but the west wing was barely fit for cows. After demolition, it would rise again as a small kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom. Old Zhang engaged his son as our contractor, and always referred to him as ‘the builder’, whose team of relatives would be paid by the day. Little wonder the renovation work dragged so long!

‘The builder’ estimated costs at “roughly 10,000 yuan”, and gave a timetable of one to two months. Ultimately, we paid triple that amount and waited four months before the place was habitable. With commitments keeping us in Beijing during the week, unwelcome surprises often lay in wait. Some walls disappeared – “you didn’t say you wanted it” was Young Zhang’s reasoning for knocking the bedroom and sitting room into one - and other walls arose, cutting off the orchard. A moon gate was the compromise, providing us with access, and soothing village fears we had invaded ‘collective’ land.

Yet the cottage proved our best ‘purchase’ ever, not only as a bargain (for the same amount, we could buy perhaps 6 square meters of the flat we rent in the city), but for the pleasure it provides. A paddling pool entralls the children, and energetic visitors enjoy trekking to nearby tombs or peaks. The fresh air, blue sky, and songbirds are a rare treat for Beijing residents. Villagers begin to ask if our friends might be interested in their old homes. What have we started?!

[ends] Cramped inside a city center apartment, mobbed by construction clamour on all sides, we longed for a country cottage to escape.

It has become increasingly fashionable among affluent urban dwellers to get a place to retreat in the countryside during weekends to escape the urban grind. Quite a few years back, after being granted two days weekend off, many began to explore the outskirts of Beijing which is blessed by plenty of scenic attractions and historic sites. Holiday camps and home stays sprang up to cater such trends. Some discovered that it is not expensive at all to buy a country house.

Last year, a friend of mine, a CEO of a start-up company bought a farm house in a quiet village deeply hidden in a

mountain way out of town. He bumped into it during many of his excursions. “I would go crazy if I stay in Beijing all the time as it is so polluted and so fast paced. I come here to relax and recover.”

For those with money and style, there is the ‘Commune by the Great Wall’, an avant-garde villa complex, selling at 300,000 pounds per unit. Without such budget or a car, we set our eyes on Ming Tomb where 13 Ming dynasty emperors were buried. Under one hour’s drive from downtown, it is a patchwork of field, forest and orchard, where magnificent mountains frame the lives of warm, friendly villagers. It is our favorite picnic spot.

Over the years, we befriended Zhang Tong, the 75-year-old caretaker of ruined Siling of the last Ming emperor. Old Zhang, the former head of the production team, gladly took up the task of house hunting for us. His first choice, however, was far from ideal. Described by him as ‘beautifully furnished, most suitable for you city folks’, the house is a hideous two-story white tiled building with blue glass. Such white and blue monsters have become the symbol of rural prosperity. We had to stress to him that what we wanted was simple and rustic.

Several false alarms later, early this spring, Old Zhang introduced us to his neighbour Mr Yin who had recently moved to a tall grand house. I fell in love with Yin’s old house when I spotted the traditional styled slanted roof and the great view of the mountains behind. A typical northern house, there is no glass but white paper against wooden window panels and it possesses an old fashioned charm that the tall new buildings lack. There is a large yard as well as a large orchard, bursting with apple, apricot and chestnuts trees.

At the negotiation table, Mr Yin demanded 50,000 yuan (3,850 pounds), 30,000 for the house and 20,000 for the orchard and we offered 20,000 yuan. After a few rounds of hard talks, Old Zhang, serving as the middle man, brokered at a 2,500 pounds deal.

The only question now was how to transfer the ownership of the house. Mr Yin wanted to get the village chief to be the witness, hoping to make our deal somehow official. But he refused flatly, saying that there is clear law now that farmers are not allowed to sell their houses to urban dwellers – all land belongs to the state. However, there is always a way around the rules in China. The chief suggested that Mr Yin rented the house to me because there was no law against it.

Mr Yin drafted a contract for ‘long term rental’. Complaining the tem was too vague, I rephrased it as ‘permanent rental’. The single paged contract, written on a piece of battered white paper, now looked rather sad with scribbles and corrections.(I had to correct his spellings.) “It doesn’t look very formal,” sighed Old Zhang after we had signed (he did, too, as the witness). “We’ve got to have a fingerprint.” He dispatched his wife to borrow some red ink. “Yes, that’s more like it!” blowing the paper dry, Old Zhang said with satisfaction.

It seems that people always have one problem or another with their contractors any where in the world. Old Zhang engaged his son as our contractor, who he always referred as ‘the builder’. Ours were beginner’s mistakes. I left things too vague, thinking we were all friends. The builders were paid by the day. It was no wonder the work dragged so long, as the builders had no incentive to finish!

The main building was in reasonable condition, and required a lick of paint. The main work involved demolishing the west wing and building a kitchen, bathroom, and guestroom. The builder Zhang had estimated costs at “roughly 10,000 yuan”, and gave a timetable of one to two months. Ultimately, we paid triple that amount and waited four months before the place was habitable.

With commitments keeping us in Beijing during the week, unwelcome surprises lay in store most weekends. Some walls disappeared - “you didn’t say you wanted it.” was Young Zhang’s reasoning for knocking the bedroom and sitting-room into one – and others arose, cutting off the orchard. A moon gate was the compromise, providing us with access, and soothing village fears we had invaded ‘collective’ land.

The cottage approved to be our best purchase ever, not only because it was such a bargain(with all the money we spent on it, we could only buy 5 square meters of the flat we are renting now), but also because it has given us so much fun. We have been going there almost every weekend since its inauguration, with different groups of friends.

We have a large paddling pool for the children. And the energetic adults have enjoyed trekking in the tombs or the mountains. The fresh air, blue sky, and singing birds are a real treat to Beijing residents.

For years, we had been trying to find a country cottage to buy so that we could escape from polluted Beijing during the weekends. We live in a cramped flat in the city center, mobbed by construction work from all sides. Everyday, we are woken up by the noise of drills.

I was particularly inspired after a British journalist friend Carrie bought her house in a village in the Ming Tombs area. There are actually two tombs. One is for Chongzhen, the last emperor of Ming Dynasty, who hung himself behind the Forbidden City, when peasant rebels fought their way to the capital. He was later given imperial treatment nevertheless. The other is for one of his concubines. Named Dalingjiang (the gully that leads to the tombs), the village is a charming place with peaceful fields, dense pine woods around the tombs, magnificent mountains behind and warm, friendly villagers.

Only less than one hour's drive away, it is another world away. Being the imperial burial ground, the area has the best 'fengshui' in China! In fact, Carrie discovered the village when she went there to do a story how cemeteries sprung up in the area because of its good fengshui, and sometimes good farmland was sacrificed.

During my frequent visits there, I befriended Zhang Tong, the caretaker of the Chongzhen's tomb. Unrenovated, it is sealed off from tourists. Hunchbacked, with a pair of sleepy eyes, Old Zhang, the former head of production team, has not lost any bit of his wit at the ripe age of 75. It was him who helped the negotiation on the house deal for Carrie a few years ago. Once, after playing hide and seek with our children among bits of carved tomb stones and Old Zhang's vegetable patch, I told him I would very much like to buy a house here myself. We fell in love with the village. After each visit of the village, we always feel refreshed and energized. And our children love so many animals around there.

Last Spring, I went to the cottage to stay the night there with our friend Lucy's family, who now rent the place with another family after Carrie's return to England. Old Zhang came to see me with exciting news: he had found the perfect house for me. "Does it have to be in this village?" he asked. "No!" "Come with me then." Lucy kindly offered to drive us there. "The house is beautifully furnished, most suitable for you city folks. Only 250,000 yuan! (20,000 pounds)" Old Zhang still raved about the house on the way. I thought, "Wow, the big moment has come!"

After 15 minutes drive, we were out of the scenic Ming Tomb area and came to a flat village. When I was shown the 'beautiful house', my heart sank: it is a two-storey ugly house, with white tiles and blue glass, a classic case of small town farmers trying to show off their newly gained wealth. All over China, whenever a region is 'developed', you can always find such horrible buildings furnished with white tiles and blue glass. I fled at the earliest convenience.

I told Zhang later what I wanted was a down to earth, poor farmer's rustic house. The next one he found for me nearly fit into the description. The house, right in the village this time, was burnt down. I rejected it because I did not want the hassle to build a new house from scratch. He tried a couple more times, but none of them worked, either too small or in bad location.

In March this year, when I visited the village again, old Zhang mentioned almost casually that one of the empty houses in the village became available – knowing now that I am such a fancy buyer, he had lost his enthusiasm. Mr Yin, the owner of the house, recently built a tall grand new house for himself and his married son's family. Located in the heart of the village, the old house, made from stone and bricks, was a typical farming house in the north. There is no glass, but white paper against wooden window panel. The main building, facing south, had three rooms. There was another run-down building to the west side. There is a fair sized yard as well a very large, lovely orchid with 20 apple trees, two apricot trees and a chestnut tree.

Standing in the yard, when I saw the old styled slanted roof and the great view of the mountains behind, I decided to take it. It has become one of the shortest buildings in the village since new houses become taller and taller. But it possesses an old fashioned charm that the tall new buildings lack.

Mr Yin's first price was 50,000 yuan (3850 pounds). And I said I wanted to pay 20,000. When old Zhang arranged us to meet up

for negotiation, his price came down to 40,000 and mine 25,000. “That’s okay,” said Yin, rising first from the negotiating table. “I’ve got a friend in Beijing who is interested. I’ll give the house to whoever pays the highest.” I nearly agreed to his price right on the spot. Old Zhang stopped me with his sleepy witty eyes. After Yin’s gone, Zhang said: “I bet his Beijing friend did not exist. Give it a cold treatment, his price will come down. Be patient.”

But patience is something I don’t have. I was planning to get the house straight away and do it up so I could have a party there to celebrate my birthday in mid-May. I would regret forever if his Beijing friend did exist, and for some reason was willing to pay higher than my bid – 25,000 yuan is not a small price to pay for a simple farmhouse. Tortured by this thought, I decided to apply the same strategy. I called Old Zhang, asking him to pass a message to Yin – I was offered a much cheaper house elsewhere. If he did not cut down his price, I would go for the other one.

Another round of talks was arranged quickly. It looked like that my threat worked. He made some concession. So did I, though there was still a gap. In the end, old Zhang concluded: “if you both are sincere to reach this deal. Let me to have the final say: take the middle price, 32500 yuan (2500 pounds), deal!”

Afterwards, when Mr Yin took me to his house for a proper tour, I dragged my friend Lucy along, to see if she approved. I warned her not to show any excitement in case Mr Yin would shoot up his price. During the whole time there, Lucy remained stone-faced without a word. “Lucy, what do you think?” I asked anxiously. She covered her smiling mouth, and answered in a muffled voice, “I simply can not separate my words with facial expression!”

When Carrie bought her house in the village, the law regarding the sale of farmhouses was more vague. The village chief signed the contract as a witness. Now, it is definitely not legal to sell such houses as all land in China belongs to the states. When Mr Yin went to see the head of the village, he said he was not going to get involved. But it is okay if Yin wants to rent out the place to me. In China, there is always a way around the rules.

The following weekend, I went to the village with cash. Mr Yin drew up a very simple contract, saying he is letting out his house to me for ‘long term use’. No idea how this should be done, I simply changed ‘long term use’ to ‘permanent use’ and a couple of wrong characters. With all the changes, the contract, written in a piece of dirty paper, looked really sad now. So, Old Zhang produced a piece of white paper and ordered Yin to write out two copies. Then, Yin and I signed, so did Zhang as a witness. That was it? We all felt it bit of anti-climax. Old Zhang looked at the paper and said: “It does not look very formal. We’ve got to have a fingerprint.” He sent his wife out to borrow a box of red ink. Then, three of us put down our fingerprints with the red ink next to our signatures. Zhang picked up the contract again, blowing the ink to dry it: “Yes, that’s more like it!”

Doing up the house

Zhang Tong, the old wise man in the village, found me the cottage and acted as the middleman for me. It was natural that he would find me builders to do up the house. “You are an outsider.” He says, “If you find someone you don’t know to do the work, they’ll most definitely rip you off, particularly, your husband is a foreigner, which in people’s mind, very rich.” The builder Zhang found for me was his son, Zhang Yushan, though old Zhang never referred to him as ‘my son’, but always ‘the builder’.

Looking back, I was amazed how careless we were. Everything was so vague. I asked the builder how much it would cost, he said: “about over 10,000 yuan. How long? “one or two months.” We did not agree a package. They were just paid by the day for as long it took. I did not know how many people would work on the house, what were their rates. I just thought they were friends. Everything would be fine.

I told the builder vaguely what I wanted to be done on the house. The main building was still in a good condition. All it needed was new paint. I wanted to pull down the west wing and then reconstruct a kitchen, bathroom and a guestroom.

My vague instruction left plenty of room for the builders to interpret things in their own way. Since I was too busy with my work as well as two little children, I simply couldn’t afford to go there every day to supervise the construction. So, every weekend, when we went over to have a look of the house, there was usually some surprise for us.

The first week, I discovered that the wall dividing the large sitting room and the bedroom had disappeared, for some reasons beyond my comprehension. “Why?” “Well,” began builder Zhang, “You didn’t say you wanted it.” “But I did not say I didn’t want it.” The other workers joined in. “No worries. We’ll build a better one for you.” It was the first time I noticed that there were five people working on the house, two middle-aged men, a woman and two teenager kids. It briefly occurred to me to ask what these young kids were doing there. But I didn’t.

The work on the house seemed to proceed quite quickly in the first few weeks. When we returned to the village, to my horror, I found a new brick wall emerged between the house and the orchard which I most definitely said I did not want! The best thing about this cottage is the orchard which was very beautiful in Spring with flowers in full blossom. Barred by the wall, we simply could not see it from the yard!

“It was my idea.” Says Old Zhang. He explained the territory where the orchid was did not belong to Yin, strictly speaking, but a public asset in the village, formerly shared by the ‘collective’ under the planned economy system China has been abandoning over two decades. The villagers, however, often use the land next to their house for personal purpose. It is usually tolerated if people do not go over the top. If I, as an outsider, wanted to build a wall encircle the whole house and the orchid, it might seem to be too aggressive. Some might report this to the authority. Given my shaky legal rights to the house, we’d better not do things that may rock the boat.

I was easily convinced. How about the wall, though. Old Zhang narrowed his sleepy eyes to stare at the wall: “No problem. I’ll open a moon gate for you.” The moon gate turned out to be a delightful feature in the house.

Progress slowed. It was simply not in their interest to finish the work quickly. 30 yuan a day for the helpers, 40 yuan for builder Zhang and another experienced hands. A friend of mine suggested that I ought to agree a price with the builders. Then, they would have the incentive to complete. When I raised this with builder Zhang, he said: “Sure, you draw me a detailed blueprint with detailed instructions. Anything not included here, we won’t touch.” But I absolutely had no idea how to draw a blueprint for a house. So, I gave up.

It dragged on. It was well into the second month when we went away for holiday in the end of April when the work was supposed to complete. I decided to send our helper Xiaohong there for five days, just to see how they worked. After our return, Xiaohong reported to me disapprovingly: “What easy money they are making from you!” During the five days, they worked about two days. It rained one day; another day, there was no water. When there was water and good weather, they ran out of sand. They called the sand man, but he was out. So, they rested, smoking, chatting and joking. “Do you know who they are?” Xiaohong asked, “Zhang Tong’s son, his daughter in-law, daughter-in-law’s brother, Zhang Tong’s grandsons!”

I just laughed when I learnt this. ‘Don’t let your natural fertilizer flow to other people’s fields,’ runs the proverb. ‘Keep the wealth within the family.’ Why not. I don’t mind who works on the house as long as they get the job done.

Soon, Old Zhang passed a message to me: the house is finished! That weekend, we transported tons of household goods there, expecting to inhabit our country cottage at long last. However, when we entered the house, we found the side building still lacked windows and door. Old Zhang alone is working slowing on the carpentry work. “We could not find a carpenter to work on the house for a short time. So, I have been doing all the carpentry work here.” Indeed, Old Zhang was trained as a carpenter in his youth. Thanks to his old age, he had not practiced it for a long time. No wonder the work on the house dragged on for so long by relaying on him for the carpentry work! Besides, Zhang had to tend his contract land. He was busy seeding beans and sweetcorn on top of his carpentry duty.

It was in middle June when all the work was completed. Windows were put on and the mess in the yard was cleared away. On the final day, builder Zhang gave me a big bill which accounted five people’s work right till that day, plus Old Zhang’s carpentry work at the highest rate of 50 yuan a day. The total turned out more than double of what he originally estimated. So did the length of the time. “Did all of you work from the beginning till today?” I asked. “Yes, everyday.” He replied without hesitation. “Did anyone take time off for some reason or got sick?” “Nothing of that sort.” “How about the two and a half days day you were unable work when Xiaohong was here?” “Ok, I give you a discount of two and a half day.”

Although the work on the house was done very roughly, our cottage looks absolutely beautiful now. We laid down turf (American imported, we were told) in our spacious yard. Its lovely green matches the freshly painted green colour of the house. All of our visitors have been deeply impressed.

When we stayed at the cottage for the first time, our 'kang', a mud bed that can be heated, partially collapsed. What to blame was the combination of Calum's hefty weight and bad quality of mud bed. When I went to him to report what happened, he said with authority: "too wet! From now on, you must heat up the kang each time you come here. Let me know if you have no fuel." How can we sleep in a heated bed when it is nearly 40 degree here? But I said: "I'll see what I can do."

The last position Old Zhang held was in the distance past, yet, he still holds an air of authority and I have learnt not to argue with him. I am still deeply fond of him for his earthy wit, his strong will and his friendship. True, he and his family might have made nice bit of money from us. He was absolutely right that an outsider from the city is bound to be ripped off! I don't mind as long as it is not too much. And without him, I would not have found the house in the first place.

The cottage approved to be our best purchase ever because it has given us so much fun. We have been going there almost every weekend since its inauguration, with different groups of friends. We have a large paddling pool for the children. And the energetic adults have enjoyed trekking in the tombs or the mountains. The fresh air, blue sky, and singing birds are a real treat to Beijing residents.