

FANG LIFENG DOMESTIC WORKER, 26

Back in my village the first song I learnt was 'I love Beijing's Tiananmen'. I had always longed to come here. It sounded so wonderful with its sights, great monuments and parks. And I particularly wanted to see Tiananmen Square, the heart of our country.

At 18 I finally had the opportunity to come to look after a baby for a distant relative. I slept in their sitting room and had to get up at night. Upon my request, the family took me to see Tiananmen. Wow, it was so grand and the square so big. My eyes were busy taking in so many things: buildings soaring into the sky and wide roads with streams of cars. The Forbidden City was nearby. But the entrance fee was ¥40 [£3], way too expensive.

After the family moved away I found a job as a maid with a wealthy Beijing family. Although the salary was higher, I was treated like a slave and not even allowed to use their toilet. After that I did all sorts of jobs as a cleaner, maid, saleswoman and laundry lady.

Now I work as a cook for a company in central Beijing from 8am to 2:30pm and then as a maid for a family in the same building from 3pm to whenever I finish work, usually 8pm. I am like a spinning top, spinning all day long.

I live with my husband in a one-room place in the eastern outskirts of Beijing, where many migrants live – the rent is cheap. The houses are simply constructed concrete blocks, without indoor toilets or heating. Many Beijingers don't know such slums exist here. When I have a day to rest, I catch up with my sleep, wash clothes and call my two-year-old son. We had to leave him behind in Hebei because we can't work and have him around.

After eight years living in Beijing, I don't feel that I belong here. Apart from Tiananmen and a couple of local parks, I have not been to the other sights. The city has become more prosperous but, for me, it has lost its glow. I hate the traffic. In the morning rush hour the main streets are often so jammed that I have to ride my bike on the pavement. I also miss my village's fresh, clean air but I don't want to go home as I make a lot more money here. I hope my son will get a good education so that he can one day become a real Beijinger.



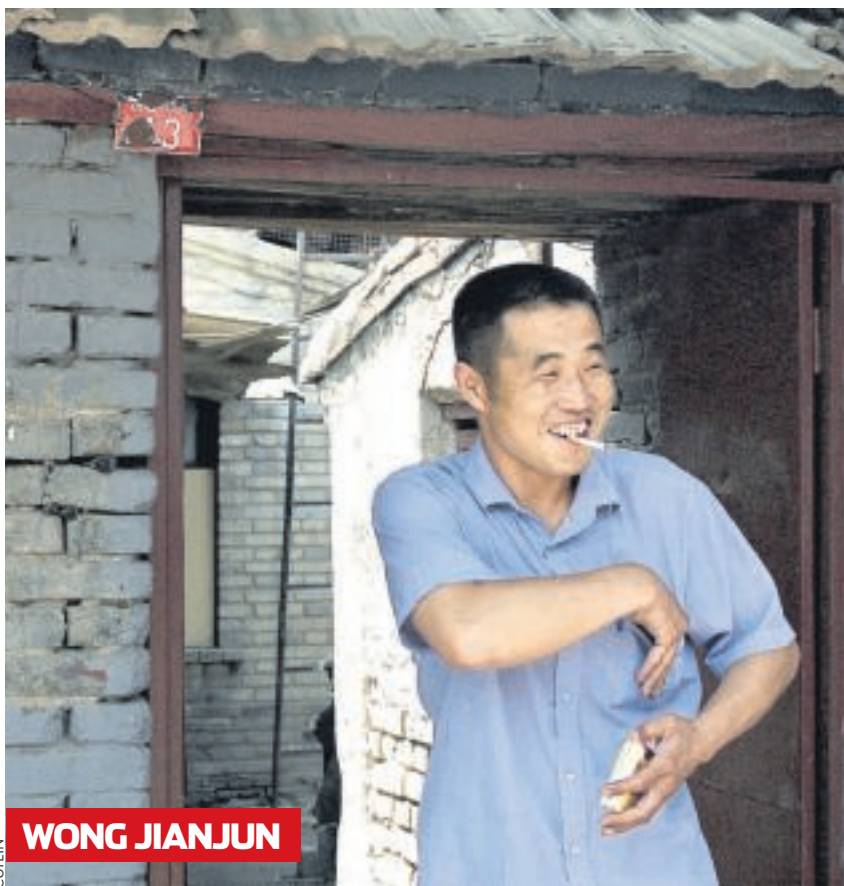
FANG LIFENG

LIJIA ZHANG



CUI LIN

BEN MCMILLAN



WONG JIANJUN

CUI LIN



XIA FENGZHI

DAVID PATTINSON

CUI LIN CONSTRUCTION WORKER, 31

I came to Beijing from my village in north China at the age of 18 to try my luck. When I got out of the train station I kept looking up and wondering how they built so high. It was soon no longer a secret for me because I found a job on a construction site. Now I've been constructing buildings for more than 10 years and don't know how many miles of walls I've built. It's a job Beijingers don't like to do, while we migrants have no alternative. I work 10 hours a day including weekends and often work extra hours. Each month I can get about 1,800 yuan [£130]. I spend only ¥200 and save the rest. I live in a tent with seven people and eat at the canteen on the site. The food sucks but costs only ¥4 [30p] a day. My wife works in a different place in Beijing as a cleaner. She lives in a dormitory. We only meet about once a week. My four-year-old daughter stays in my hometown with my mother.

This year I don't have time to see her, as the Olympics have brought my boss lots of projects. We are now working night and day on a hotel to make sure it can be completed on time. Several days ago I finally got a break and went to see the Olympic Village. I was quite impressed by the Bird's Nest. Beijing is becoming more and more beautiful. I wish I could stay but after so many years I still don't feel I belong to the city. In one more year I will save enough money to build a house in my hometown and work on a farm.

WONG JIANJUN PARCEL COURIER, 45

I was born in the hutongs, brought up here, and have lived here for all my life. My parents moved here more than 50 years ago, and in this house my mother gave birth to my older brother and sister and me. Life in the hutongs hasn't always been easy. But we are content, having this fantastic three-room house to ourselves. This is the last bit of peace and quiet you can have in this fast-changing capital.

When I was a kid, the neighbouring children and I played all kinds of games here. The most popular was hide-and-seek. Sometimes, when I had been hiding in a neighbour's house for too long and happened to be there when they served dinner, they would invite me to come out to have dinner with them. Even today we don't lock our doors when you know the neighbours are in. You can always trust that they will take good care of your house and your children when you are away for something.

Now we have modern bathrooms and we also have heating in each room, so life in the hutongs is much easier than before. But I am sad that some of my old neighbours moved out. They rented their house here to migrant workers who have moved to Beijing from other parts of China. But I am

afraid I don't feel that close to the new neighbours.

I earn between ¥1,700 and ¥1,800 a month. It is not much. Beijing is expensive. And my 12-year-old daughter actually spends more than an adult [Wong spends ¥900 on extracurricular classes, hoping they will enable her to win a place at the prestigious high school]. But I manage to make ends meet if I spend frugally. At least I have a stable job with a state-owned company.

TOP 5

INDOOR SPORTS IN BEIJING

- LASER TAG
- ★
- BILLIARDS
- ★
- INDOOR HOOPS
- ★
- BOWLING
- ★
- ROLLER SKATING

Source: City Weekend magazine

XIA FENGZHI RETIRED RADIO OPERATOR, 70

My story is a common one. I was born in a village outside Beijing but moved to the city at 16 to work as a radio operator, a job I held until my retirement. A package holiday to Australia fired up my enthusiasm for learning English. On my return I organised an English-speaking corner in our community in eastern Beijing's Unity Lake area. It has now developed into a proper course with volunteer teachers.

When I get up in the morning I listen to English news from Beijing Radio international. Then I go to the class, go home for lunch and a nap and return to the class in the afternoon. Learning English, now my obsession, has enriched my life. I enjoy a good life: everything's convenient. There's a market in the neighbourhood where my wife buys fresh vegetables and meat every morning. There are grocery stores, supermarkets and a pharmacy, which all stay open late. Unity Lake Park stands around the corner. I do my exercise there in the morning and ballroom dance in the evening with my wife and our friends.

Having spent all my life in Beijing, I witnessed the transformation in front of my eyes: our capital has become more

beautiful; more modern and prosperous, with higher and higher skyscrapers. There are a lot more parks and green spaces. There are also open-air sports facilities in every community for people to use for free. And our quality of living has improved dramatically. To take myself as an example: before, six of us squeezed into two rooms; now, two of us live in a three-bedroom flat. Before, we could savour meat once a month; now, whenever we feel like it. The traffic can be bad but it doesn't bother me as I walk or cycle. In Australia it struck me how sparsely populated the country is. Beijing is crowded but we are used to it. Everywhere you go, you meet someone you know. Nice! Having signed up as a volunteer, I am excited about the Olympics. The foreigners will see what China has achieved. To make their stay more enjoyable we need English-speaking people, to give directions or simply to have a chat with them. I look forward to it. I will put on my best outfit: I want to be the image ambassador for Beijing's elders.

Interviews by Lou Li, Lijia Zhang and April Zhang

Ai Weiwei: visionary artist
Pages 8-9

