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# Breakdown in communal life is the heavy price of progress

DAVID FANG

With no central heating or air-conditioning in her traditional Beijing home, Tian Jingxian shivers in winter and swelters in summer. And when she wants to go to the toilet, she has to walk a few hundreds metres to a fetid public facility.

But this house near the centre of Beijing is her home - she was born in it and feels part of a harmonious community here.

And yet soon, like so many others in the capital, she will be forced to leave her single-storey home and move into a high-rise block in the bleak suburbs. Her house will be demolished to make way for one of the projects for the 2008 Olympics.

"The modern conveniences of the new apartment will be fantastic," says Mrs Tian, 57. "But I will lose my neighbours. We always help each other out and we chat on the road. All that will be lost."

An old saying goes: "A close neighbour means much more than a distant relative." But as the country's cities grow and modernise, traditional neighbourhoods have been smashed by the wrecking ball.

Not surprisingly, a new survey on neighbourly relations in six major cities points to the breakdown of communal life in the major urban centres on the mainland.

The survey by Market-Expert, a Shanghai-based market research firm, has found that 44 per cent of mainland urban families do not know their neighbours' names, while 63 per cent do not have any contact with the people next door.

Families that once lived in assigned city housing in courtyards and *hutong* lanes have been moved to high-rise apartments where they have little or no contact with other residents.

"Independent housing means people have fewer chances to interact with their neighbours," says Market-Expert manager Wu Bin. "The mobility of those that rent private housing also means there is little opportunity to establish a solid communal base."

The survey, which covered 1,821 families in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hangzhou, Nanjing and Wuhan, also shows an increasing obsession with privacy.

"People want their privacy now," Mr Wu says. "As individuals, we are becoming more isolated and are less interested in interacting with those around us."

Zhang Xiaoming, who lives in a high-rise in Beijing, says privacy is more important to him than neighbourly relations. "I don't know the names of my neighbours, and I don't care to know them."

Xia Xueluan, a Peking University sociologist, says: "Everything is based on self interest now. Our society is becoming more uncaring."

Mrs Tian dreads her move. "I will feel so alone in the new place. I will not know anyone. Now I have a colourful life, but after I move, it will be so dull and lonely."