

# GONGTI'S UNDERGROUND SLUM

by Justine Lopez



Residents of a high-end apartment building in Beijing recently discovered that they were living above a whole colony of people.

During an inspection in June, local authorities found 400 people living in a bomb shelter in the basement of Julong Gardens, near the Workers' Stadium. The old bunker had been converted into a slum comprised of 40 cramped rooms, unventilated kitchens, designated smoking areas and only one emergency exit. In some cases, up to 36 people inhabited a single room, according to the BBC.

Such conditions would be considered unlivable by most. But, as dystopian as it sounds, it is estimated that over 1 million people – mostly poor migrant workers and students from rural areas – live in Beijing's mysterious and massive system of underground bunkers. The phenomenon has become so prevalent in Beijing that these people are known as *shuzu* (rat tribe).

Beijing's subterranean shelters were built between 1969 and 1979 – the height of the Cold War – under the direction of Chairman Mao. Although there is no official record of this underground world, it is believed that 10,000 interconnected bunkers were constructed in anticipation of nuclear war with the Soviet Union and the USA. The network of

bomb shelters is so extensive that it is capable of housing up to 6 million residents.

With all of this unused space, a market has cropped up to exploit the many poor migrants who can't afford Beijing's inflated housing costs. They have converted the bunkers into squalid living spaces, charging tenants comparatively modest fees. With the capital's booming population and rapidly rising rental prices, more and more people are left with no choice but to go underground.

According to one resident of the Julong Gardens bunker, tenants paid RMB1,300 (USD264) per month for a dorm bed. That's about one-tenth of what the residents of Julong Gardens pay for their much posher apartments.

Julong Gardens – and its underground shelter – is officially owned by the Beijing Government, though it was likely subleased to another party thereafter. It is unclear who exactly was renting out rooms to these 400 tenants.

Although renting underground is a common practice in the capital, authorities started clamping down on it in 2015. Earlier this year, the local government announced plans to tear down roughly 40 million square meters of illegal rooms and structures – many of

which are located underground – by the start of 2018. In March, over 700 underground rooms in Hepingmen, near Tiananmen Square, were removed, and over 350 people were displaced. During the first two months of this year, construction workers demolished at least 13,862 square meters of illegal shelters and 1,157 rooms in Beijing. They reportedly helped the 2,000-or-so residents who inhabited these bunkers find new accommodation.

As unique as the case of Julong Gardens' underground colony sounds, it is just another example of Beijing's crackdown on illegal structures, and it is merely one of many similar stories that are currently unfolding across the capital.