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CHINA REAL TIME REPORT

# Ghost City: China Property Agency Launches 'Haunted House' Database

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From flimsy fixtures to pestilential pipes, Beijing apartments generally come with one defect or another. So who needs an angry ghost added to the equation?

To help potential residents suss out whether their apartment might be prone to supernatural visitors with axes to grind, one Chinese property agency has created a database cataloging unnatural deaths—murders, suicides, etc.— that have occurred in Beijing homes.

According to an analysis posted on a site operated by China's Ministry of Justice, no clear law exists that requires Chinese landlords or would-be sellers to disclose, say, a particularly brutal history attached to an apartment. To be sure, there's precedent for buyers who weren't aware of such a past to gain compensation through the courts if they feel duped. In one 2011 case, a buyer surnamed Wang ended up being awarded about 60,000 yuan after the seller failed to make clear that a previous resident had committed suicide on the premises.

Still, the site warns, *caveat emptor*.

Enter the haunted-home database. Such databases have also been created in cities such as Hong Kong and Taipei, where residents likewise have a strong aversion to homes with violent histories. In Hong Kong, for example, such homes are meticulously documented. Traditionally, they have been sold for discounts of as much as 30% and are particularly popular with expats, who agents say are less superstitious and disturbed by such pasts.

A report carried in the Beijing Youth Daily said that the Beijing-based database, created by property agency Home Link, currently features 900 entries. The paper said the database was created after the agency had run into a number of sticky situations in which customers learned about a violent death in their home only after a deal had already been finalized. The company didn't respond to a request for comment.

As China's housing property prices have zoomed upwards in recent years, Zhou Yinggang, director of the Chinese University of Hong Kong's Center for Hospitality and Real Estate Research, said that while the database might be intended to assist potential residents, its information could also be helpful for investors. In Hong Kong, which in years past has experienced a meteoric property rise, some investors who might be priced out of other segments of the market have deliberately targeted haunted apartments, he said.

"This could help create a market for alternative investments," Mr. Zhou said. "Some haunted homes are in pretty good neighborhoods."

Either way, buyers can take comfort from one thing: Much of China's housing stock is new enough that the odds of anything very sordid having previously happened in a particular apartment are comparatively slim. Nearly 80% of all of China's urban housing stock is just about a decade or so old. By contrast, in the U.S., about 85% of housing was built before 2000.

– *Te-Ping Chen*

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