

An apology for the cherished tradition of drying laundry in the open air

Wan Lixin

Most people think clothes dried outdoors have a special fresh fragrance, but urban management authorities tend to view airing of garments and linens out in the open as an affront to the aesthetic image the city wants to project.

However, attempts to curtail the popular practice haven't met with unqualified success. Laundry flapping in the breeze can still be seen in some streets and lanes in Shanghai and is ubiquitous on home balconies.

The display of our personal apparel for all to see does depend on climate and residential environment. In the hot, dry northwestern region of Xinjiang, for example, clothes dry in two to five hours, whether hung indoors or out.

In the southern metropolis of Shenzhen, laundry is perhaps less conspicuous because it has to be hung inside the dominant, burglar-proof iron cages installed on windows and balconies. I think drying laundry does tell us something



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Shanghai resident who was relocated to housing in Pudong decades ago

about the way we look at life.

I've lived in quite a few places before coming to Shanghai, but it is here that I have acquired a deep-seated appreciation of rooms facing south.

Consider Jia Yi (200-168 BC). He was a counsellor to the emperor and a seminal figure in making Confucianism the orthodoxy of the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC-24AD). After court intrigues, he was banished from what is today Xi'an in dry northwestern China to the less civilized, humid

southern city of what is today Changsha.

Jia was understandably gloomy. He worried that the "moisture and the miasma in the south might lead to an early death." Indeed, he died at age 32.

While humidity is great for vegetation and, it is said, for women's complexions, it can wreak havoc with trying to dry laundry outdoors and turns it into a veritable nightmare during the long plum rainy season. Shanghai is notorious for in

early summer.

But locals are nothing if not resourceful in adapting to weather and making the most of limited sunshine.

"In the past, when we lived in an old neighborhood in Yangpu District, we would dry our laundry on bamboo poles stretching over a small courtyard from our side to the wall of a neighbor," said Hu Baolian, who was relocated to housing in Pudong decades ago. "Some people would even hang laundry on powerlines."

Now 77 and still active in community work, she recalled those difficult years when living space was limited, children were many and laundry loads were big.

Despite now living in a high-rise apartment that is much better appointed than her old neighborhood, Hu still dries her laundry in the sun. But there is one difference. The bamboo poles have been replaced by retractable racks installed immediately outside her balcony. If the weather is not good, she used racks on her balcony.

She noted, however, that while the old exterior racks are tolerated, new ones are not. Any complaints from neighbors about new installations would lead property managers to have them removed.

Still, balcony drying has the advantage of relieving any worries about rain.

"In the old days, neighbors knew each other and if it suddenly started to rain, they would alert others to bring their laundry in," Hu said. "Today, it's safer for working couples to hang their laundry on balconies."

For people her age, the idea of abandoning open-air drying in favor of an electric dryer is unthinkable.

A Chinese friend surnamed Shen, who spent some years in Australia, said that "the only shortcoming with using dryers is that the clothes need to be ironed afterward."



People in Shanghai still dry laundry in the sun. — IC



A migrant worker airs family quilts on river railings in Shanghai's Minhang District, hiding her face because authorities frown on the practice. — Ti Gong