



Bamboo poles, electric wires, ropes and colorful clothes form a unique street scene in Shanghai. — IC

“With drying in sunlight, all you need to do is give the clothes a good shake before putting them outside to dry,” he said.

Many people here tend to mystify or even sentimentalize the drying of laundry in the open air.

“It has a crispy, dry fragrance,” one person insisted. “The fluffy quilt is more cuddly,” said another. There’s no doubt that some residents would continue to dry laundry outdoors even if they had free access to electric dryers.

But access to the sunshine can be a luxury.

Recently I saw a woman adjusting a lineup of quilts airing on rails by a river in Minhang District. When she realized I was trying to take a picture, she pressed her face against a quilt to avoid being photographed. She explained that urban management authorities frown on the practice.

Some neighborhoods provide communal outdoor drying racks for residents. My in-laws, who live on the third floor of an apartment complex, use the racks to dry larger items, like coats and linens.

Sometimes the zeal to dry laundry outdoors goes a bit too far.

In my apartment building, for instance, a first-floor resident reduced a beautiful magnolia to stubble in order to support their outdoor clothes rack. They proceeded to turn what was a public garden area into a private courtyard, complete with paved boardwalk.

I was among the residents irritated by their reckless act, and raised the issue with property management. The issue got bogged down in red tape for a long time, but the guilty party was finally forced to remove the boardwalk. However, most of the drying apparatus remains.

Perhaps drying laundry

outside is just a natural extension of the abiding love of nature embedded in the Chinese national psyche.

In a well-known excerpt of “The Analects,” Confucius once sounded out several of his disciples about their ambitions. The master showed thinly veiled disdain for those who voiced grandiose aspirations, but was pleased to hear the answer of an acolyte named Zeng Dian, who said his only ambition was to be content with daily life.

In a passage familiar to all Chinese, Zeng Dian said, “At the end of spring, with the spring clothes already having been finished, I would like, in the company of five or six young men and six or seven children, to cleanse ourselves in the Yihe River, to revel in the cool breezes at the Altar for Rain, and then return home singing.” No doubt his laundry dried very quickly.



Caged balconies in an old neighborhood in the southern city of Shenzhen limit access to sunshine for clothes drying. — Ti Gong