

Research paper

Notes on Carrying: A Feminist Approach to the Critical Spatial Practice of Everyday Life in Urban China

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ABSTRACT

This study pays close attention to the notion of carrying in dense urban China to understand how urban space is sustained and reshaped through ordinary, embodied actions of everyday life. Drawing on six months of ethnographic fieldwork in a residential neighbourhood in Beijing, it traces carrying practices across the domains of 衣食住行 (clothing, food, dwelling, and transport), attending to how gendered bodies experience, use, occupy, move and redefine urban spaces. The article argues that critical spatial practice in contemporary urban China extends beyond architectural design and formal planning, emerging through everyday practices of occupation, movement, and maintenance. By conceptualising carrying as both a feminist analytical lens and a methodological approach, it foregrounds the relational dynamics between bodies, objects, and the built environment, and rethinks urban space as a dynamic assemblage continuously reconfigured through the cumulative effects of everyday life.

Keywords: feminist spatial practice, gendered body, the notion of carrying, ethnographic research, urban China

In the corner of my home, there is a growing pile of plastic bags and container boxes that have accumulated over the years. They come from grocery shopping, shipping packages, or promotional gifts from vendors. Placed in a space that is inconspicuous yet easily accessible, these bags are always within reach—ready to be used for carrying things when leaving the house or for storing items within it. This small yet familiar domestic phenomenon, common in many households, reveals how carrying technologies are deeply embedded in everyday life. Yet, much like that unnoticed pile of bags tucked away in a corner, the significance of carrying remains undervalued and overlooked (Le Guin et al., 2019).

To carry is to live. Feminist scholars have long drawn attention to the hidden and undervalued labour that sustains life, including acts of cleaning, repairing, maintaining, and caring that reproduce both households and cities (Bloomer, 1994; Kasstan & Crook, 2018; Rendell, 2018; Ukeles, 1969). Drawing on feminist spatial thinking, which has for decades argued that space is gendered, embodied, relational, and produced through everyday practices (Kern, 2020; Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 1994; Puwar, 2004; Young, 1980), this study foregrounds a specific spatial practice of everyday life: carrying. Carrying is used here as a conceptual and methodological lens through which to examine the dynamic relationships between gendered bodies and urban space.

In everyday urban life, carrying takes multiple forms: transporting groceries from local markets, accompanying children and elderly family members, moving water, waste, or recycled materials, delivering goods, or holding

personal belongings while navigating dense streets and public transport. These practices are ordinary and repetitive, yet central to the organisation and sustenance of urban life. In this paper, carrying is understood as a feminist spatial practice for three interrelated reasons. First, carrying is deeply entangled with reproductive and care labour that has historically been feminised and rendered invisible, despite its essential role in sustaining everyday life (Le Guin et al., 2019). Second, carrying foregrounds the body as a site of spatial production, drawing attention to how weight, effort, posture, rhythm, and fatigue shape how space is navigated, inhabited, and endured. Third, carrying destabilises rigid distinctions between public and private, productive and reproductive, as it frequently unfolds across thresholds—between home and street, market and neighbourhood, work and care (Jones, 2024; Otter, 2024). Carrying emerges through the relational assemblage of the carrier, the carried, and the tools that enable it—such as bags, carts, baskets, and trolleys—linking gendered bodies to surrounding infrastructures and environments (Angerer et al., 2024; Sofoulis, 2000).

Based on feminist spatial theory, the notion of carrying, in this paper, is unpacked through two interwoven layers of meaning. First, it refers to the bodily, spatial activities that gendered bodies perform in daily urban life to gather, hold, and transport objects, resources, bodies, and beings. The spatial acts are deeply embedded in the details of daily life and are often feminised, as they align with gendered expectations of care and domestic responsibility (Choi et al., 2022; Larrington-Spencer et al., 2024). The second layer of meaning extends beyond the transportation of physical items. Carrying also encompasses a metaphorical and affective dimension—a subtle, often unconscious process through which bodies and their spatial extensions carry identities, memories, lived experiences, social relations, and traces of everyday life (Puwar, 2021; Sofoulis, 2000). In this sense, bodies in urban environments function as containers of political, social, cultural, and temporal entanglements (Bloomer, 1994; Puwar, 2021). Taken together, these two layers position carrying not as a singular or exceptional practice, but as a particularly revealing form of everyday spatial practice through which gendered bodies negotiate urban life. Like other ordinary practices—such as waiting, caring, maintaining, or repairing—carrying participates in the ongoing production of urban space. Its analytical value lies in how it makes visible the quiet, accumulative processes through which everyday actions of moving, holding, and sustaining gradually reshape urban life and transform urban spaces over time (Bloomer, 1994; Petrescu, 2023; Zhou, 2020).

This research is grounded in the phenomenology of urban China. As urban China undergoes a profound transformation—from macro-scale planning to residents' everyday experiences, from large-scale development to reconstructing spaces centring the rhythms of daily life—everyday practices have become increasingly central to how cities are produced and experienced (Chai et al., 2003; Cheng, 2021; 孙道胜 & 柴彦威, 2020). Within this shifting urban context, Chinese scholarship and planning practice have increasingly turned to feminist theory and feminist spatial practice as potential frameworks for addressing questions of everyday life, care, and embodied experience in urban environments. Such as studies on the design strategy of the women-friendly city (李昱萱 et al., 2025), the incorporation of gender-sensitive perspectives into urban design (Qin, 2019), and urban public space design informed by feminist geography or feminist approaches (Chai et al., 2003; Huang & Xu, 2025). However, many current studies in China tends to treat feminism as an added principle or policy layer within urban planning and design, rather than examining how urban space is transformed through the everyday interactions of gendered bodies. As a result, feminist engagement with urban space is often framed as an abstract design ideal, rather than as a situated, lived, and relational process emerging from everyday urban life in China.

Against this background, this article seeks to address this gap by situating carrying within the framework of feminist spatial practice and examining its significance for understanding urban regeneration and transformation in China. Carrying, in this context, emerges as a specific everyday practice that reveals how gendered bodies negotiate transforming urban spaces and everyday life. Drawing on ethnographic observations in a residential neighbourhood in Beijing, it asks: *What can carrying reveal about the relationality between bodies and urban space in contemporary China? And how might attending to carrying reframe our understanding of feminist spatial practice and critical urban theory?* By focusing on the most essential acts that sustain urban life—those captured in the Chinese notion of 衣食住行 (yī shí zhù xíng, the four fundamental aspects of living: clothing, food, dwelling, and transport)—this study foregrounds carrying as a feminist spatial practice. It argues that carrying sustains life, blurs the boundaries between public and private, and reconfigures urban environments from the ground up, revealing a relational, embodied, and feminist mode of spatial production in dense urban China.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Gendered bodies and feminist spatial theory

“(I)f the body is not a thing, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and the outline for our projects” (de Beauvoir, 2011, p. 45). In *The Second Sex* (2011), Simone de Beauvoir argues that the female body is not just a biological organism, but a social and existential situation, which is constituted through historically sedimented meanings, social norms, and the lived experiences of navigating a world that positions women as “the Other”. The

body becomes a locus where social structures and gender norms are inscribed, shaping how one moves through space, inhabits time, and engages with material and symbolic worlds. In a world shaped by and for men, de Beauvoir criticises, the masculine body is assigned as “a direct and normal link with the world” — a transparent medium through which action and meaning unfold. In contrast, the female body is historically configured as “an obstacle, a prison, burdened by everything that particularises it”— something that hinders rather than enables connection with and mastery over the material world (2011, p. 5). To her, the relations between the body and the material world are not neutral or given; they are inherently gendered. However, in contrast to the rationalised and prioritised positioning of the male body in relation to the material world, the socio-spatial relations of the female body — her ways of understanding, connecting with, and shaping the world — have been persistently marginalised, constrained within “the prison” of her body.

Drawing upon de Beauvoir’s existentialism and phenomenology lens of feminist thinking, Iris Marion Young, in her *Throwing Like a Girl* (1980), shifts the focus toward “the situatedness of the woman’s actual bodily movement and orientation to its surroundings and its world”, tracing “the basic modalities of feminine body comportment, manner of moving, and relation in space” (p. 139). She critiques the tendency to overlook gendered bodies’ actual bodily movement and orientation in space. Leslie Kern’s *Feminist City* (2020) further explores the gendered body’s relationship to urban space by depicting real-life scenarios in which women navigate the city with a heightened sense of caution, constantly modifying their routes, bodily posture, and rhythms of movement in response to perceived threats, unwanted attention, or infrastructural inadequacies. Whether it’s mothers manoeuvring prams on inaccessible public transport, women shrinking their physical presence on crowded buses, using headphones to deter unwanted interactions in public spaces, or avoiding walking alone on sidewalks at night, Kern shows how everyday movement is shaped by gendered expectations and the failure of urban environments to account for diverse bodily needs. Their works open up a vital feminist approach to critical spatial practice in urban environments—one that understands the body’s movements, orientations, and burdens as central to how gendered space is experienced, negotiated, and potentially transformed.

Western feminist theory has long grappled with how gendered bodies come to be shaped by, and respond to, the built environment and social norms. Both Simone de Beauvoir and Iris Marion Young foreground the ways in which bodily experience is conditioned by material and cultural surroundings, highlighting how gender is inscribed onto the body through its spatial and social positioning. As de Beauvoir famously states, “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (de Beauvoir, 2011, p. 283). Through their arguments, the female body is reconceptualised not as a fixed entity or being defined by her biological features, rather as a “situation” composed by historical configurations, social and cultural norms, and the embodied experience of moving through a gendered world.

However, emerging at the intersections of feminism, geography, architecture, and urban studies, feminist spatial theory extends the existing feminism by asking not only how environments define gendered bodies, but also how space itself is gendered – constructed through human behaviours, power relations, and socio-spatial practices of everyday life (Massey, 1994; Rendell, 2018; Sofoulis, 2000; Star, 1999). In this paper, feminist spatial practice is defined as a critical way of thinking and doing that explores how gendered bodies engage with, inhabit, and transform their surrounding spaces through everyday activities. It recognises space as both a material and symbolic construct, continuously produced and redefined through embodied experiences and social relations. For instance, Kern’s *Feminist City* (2020) illustrates the challenges and difficulties female bodies face while navigating through the urban environments that are originally set up to facilitate men’s activities and movements. Jane Rendell (2019) introduces the concept of critical spatial practice, which foregrounds the interrelations between theory and practice, private and public, and gender and space, as a means to question and intervene in existing spatial orders. Similarly, Zoë Sofoulis (2000, 2024) uses the notion of container technologies to examine how spaces are not only gendered in their design but also in their use, often reinforcing traditional gender roles through everyday spatial practices. These feminist spatial thinkers advance an approach to studying space that begins with the gendered body and extends to its surrounding environment, proposing that the ways in which gendered bodies navigate, use, and experience space actively influence and reshape the very spaces they inhabit, demonstrating that space itself is gendered.

Feminist spatial practice in urban China and assemblage of everyday life

Since the late 20th century, many Western theories on gender and space—such as feminist geography, feminist urbanism, and critical spatial theory—have been introduced into China and have influenced urban research and practice (Huang & Xu, 2025; Wang & Li, 2020). These frameworks offer valuable insights, but scholars have increasingly recognised that the particularities of Chinese urban environments—shaped by local culture, social organisation, and governance—cannot simply adopt Western theoretical models wholesale. There is a clear need to develop a China-specific framework that accounts for these contextual conditions (Chai et al., 2003). After rapid economic and urban development, Chinese cities are entering a new stage characterised by a shift “从宏观的形

态与功能原则走向微观的居民生活，从大规模的开发建设走向存量的优化，从注重物质空间建设到日常生活空间的关注” (from macro-scale form and functional planning toward residents’ everyday life, from large-scale new development to optimisation of existing stock, and from an emphasis on material space to attention to spaces of daily living) (孙道胜 & 柴彦威, 2020, p. 1). This transition highlights the importance of examining how urban life is actually experienced and reproduced on the ground. As a result, there is a pressing need for research that attends to Chinese urban daily life and its situated feminist spatial practices in order to understand the dynamic relations between gendered bodies and urban space.

To address feminist spatial practice in urban China, it is important to acknowledge the distinct development of feminist studies in modern China, which diverges significantly from the trajectories of Western feminist theory. Rooted deeply in the political, economic, and military conditions of the twentieth century, Chinese feminism emerged through state-led institutions that promoted gender equality as a central component of socialist modernisation (Wang, 2016). This was exemplified by Chairman Mao’s well-known proclamation that “women hold up half the sky” (妇女能顶半边天), which signalled the Party’s commitment to mobilising women into the labour force and public life. The dominant representation of modern Chinese women was therefore often aligned with the image of the female worker or peasant (工农妇女), reflecting the ideological emphasis on women’s contributions to industrial and agricultural production. According to the World Bank Group’s Gender Data Portal, from 1990 to 2024, China’s female labour force participation rate has consistently remained above 50 per cent, only around ten percentage points lower than that of men, and higher than the average for upper-middle-income countries and the global rate. However, the same data also reveal that women in China spend 2.6 times as many hours on unpaid domestic and care work as men. This paradox illustrates a persistent dual burden: while Chinese women have long been mobilised into the labour force and public life, they remain disproportionately responsible for the invisible labour of sustaining households and everyday life. From a feminist spatial perspective, these data suggest that women in China remain more closely tied than men to spaces associated with domesticity and the sustenance of everyday life (张云华 & 吴嘉, 2024; 李昱萱 et al., 2025). However, the labour and practices produced within these spaces are persistently undervalued, as they lack conventional economic valuation and are commonly excluded from dominant definitions of “work” (Chenghua & Ling, 2023; Hall, 2020; 张云华 & 吴嘉, 2024). As a result, such spatial practices are rarely recognised as gendered forms of labour, despite their central role in reproducing urban life and enabling the functioning of the formal economy.

Despite official campaigns for gender equality, domestic and care labour remains under-recognised. Archival research by Wang Zheng (2010) shows that early women’s publications, such as *Women of China* (《中国妇女》), almost entirely excluded depictions of women’s everyday domestic lives, including childcare, elder care, and cooking. Ethnographic research confirms that these responsibilities continue to be disproportionately borne by women (Acar et al., 2025). Through in-depth conversations with 40 women in urban China, Larrington-Spencer et al. (2024) reveal that women continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of domestic and caregiving responsibilities. Drawing on Chinese traditional “gendered roles with *nei* (inside) and *wai* (outside)”, which designate the home (considering ‘*nei*’) as the woman’s domain and the public sphere (considering ‘*wai*’) as the man’s, her research shows how domestic and care labour remains overwhelmingly feminised (p. 5). As Larrington-Spencer et al. (2024) argue, “traditional gendered divisions of labour remained unchanged for many women,” reinforcing a model in which feminist progress is permitted without addressing home and care responsibilities (p. 5).

From a feminist spatial perspective, these everyday practices—caring for children and elderly, preparing food, or managing household resources—constitute significant forms of labour that shape the social, material, and temporal dynamics of urban environments. Although informal and often undervalued, this labour actively configures neighbourhoods and urban spaces. Scholars such as Bloomer (1994) and Ukeles (1969) have argued that domestic and maintenance labour—cleaning, mending, carrying, sustaining—are foundational spatial acts that reorder space, sustain life, and anchor memory (Daly et al., 2020). In the Chinese urban context, similar practices—carrying groceries from markets, transporting laundry to communal drying areas, escorting children to school—intertwine bodies, tools, infrastructure, and social relations, producing a continuous assemblage of everyday life.

This paper argues that practices of domestic care and everyday maintenance constitute a critical site for feminist inquiry in urban China. Their absence from official narratives is not simply a historical oversight but reflects persistent spatial hierarchies, in which the often-invisible activities that sustain life are devalued in favour of visible acts of production. These modest, everyday practices reveal the assemblage of urban life as a continual negotiation among gendered bodies, material technologies, infrastructures, and temporal rhythms (Ho, 2018; Larrington-Spencer et al., 2024; Liu, 2024; Happel-Parkins et al., 2024). By attending to these gestures, feminist spatial practice in urban China is understood not as a fixed category of design or theory but as an ongoing, embodied process—one that resists erasure, redistributes spatial meaning, and anchors the lived assemblage of the city.

The notion of carrying

In *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (1988), Ursula K. Le Guin argues that perhaps the first tool invented by the human race was not a weapon, a tool for hunting and killing, but rather, a tool or technology for containing and carrying. Yet, as Le Guin (1988) points out that the stories of carrying remain largely absent: “We’ve heard it, we’ve all heard all about all the sticks and spears and swords, the things to bash and poke and hit with, the long, hard things, but we have not heard about the thing to put things in, the container for the contained” (p. 167). More than thirty years after its initial publication, this essay by Le Guin was reprinted as a book, this time with an introduction by Donna Haraway (2019). In her introduction, Haraway shares three Mochilas she received in Colombia from her local women friends, along with the stories they carried—how local women shape their lives through carrying and transforming their narratives by creating their own bags. Through them, she showed readers how people are already writing and weaving alternative narratives and worlds by living with their lives and troubles. She reminds us that the stories of carrying are all around us, embedded in everyday life, and hold the potential to alter the world.

The notion of carrying is intricately entangled with feminist spatial practice. Le Guin (2019) starts her *Carrier Bag Theory* by gearing towards the gathering, containing, holding, and carrying – seeds, fruits, food, babies, and stories – practices that sustain everyday lives and offer care. Similarly, Zoë Sofoulis (2000, 2024), analyses “container technologies,” noting how domestic objects designed to hold, store, or carry shape women’s management of household and familial spaces. These acts of containment and carrying are not merely functional; they actively mediate gendered identities, social relations, and embodied experiences. The acts of carrying are embedded, embodied practices that shape gendered bodies’ experiences of space, movement, and care (Kern, 2020; Young, 1990).

This study conceptualises carrying as a specific type of feminist spatial practice linking the carrier, the carried, and the technologies and labour involved (Angerer et al., 2024; Sofoulis, 2000). Carrying is both spatial and relational, mediating between bodies, urban infrastructures, and daily life. While existing literature is largely grounded in Western contexts, the concept of carrying in Chinese urban and cultural settings remains underexplored, presenting both a challenge and an opportunity for this research.

In current Chinese urban studies, carrying is typically conceptualised through technocratic and ecological lenses, most notably in discussions of urban carrying capacity. This refers to the quantitative assessment of how much population, activity, or infrastructure a city or environment can support without degradation (Cao et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020; Wu & Peng, 2017). Within such frameworks, carrying is treated as a technical problem of spatial limits, resource efficiency, and policy optimisation. This research, however, reimagines carrying from a feminist perspective that emphasises the relational dynamics between gendered body and urban infrastructure. Situated at the intersection of gender and socio-spatial relations, this approach views carrying not merely as a capacity or function but as a continuous, dynamic process—one that reveals urban spaces as active, lived environments rather than passive containers. These spaces bear the daily movements, practices, and social-spatial entanglements of their inhabitants (Beebejaun, 2017; Kern, 2020).

In *Carrying as Method*, Puwar (2021) introduces the notion of carrying as a methodological framework to explore how researchers and bodies transmit experiences, histories, and influences across time, space, and generations. She connects the concept of carrying to the body, positioning it as an archival site that holds and expresses non-verbal, affective, and gestural forms of knowledge. Carrying, in her account, operates metaphorically—describing how bodies subconsciously bear identities, memories, lived experiences, and traces of everyday life through their movements, comportments, and presence. While Puwar focuses on this metaphorical and affective register, my research departs from the physical and material acts of carrying performed by gendered bodies in urban space. I foreground the spatial and social dimensions of these acts, using them to investigate the relational entanglements between bodily practice, urban space, and everyday life in contemporary China.

In dense urban China, the relationality between urban inhabitants and urban spaces is intricate and ever-changing, and this dynamic is closely intertwined with the everyday practices of its inhabitants (Zhou, 2020). Urban spaces are constantly used, influenced, made, unmade, and remade by their inhabitants (Ho, 2018; Mangurian & Ray, 2009; Xue et al., 2025). Through the notion of carrying, this article uncovers the everyday narratives of urban China, illuminating how carrying intricately links urban inhabitants and urban spaces together. This study foregrounds carrying as a vital practice, an “(inter-)active process” that reveals the interdependencies between urban inhabitants and urban spaces, offering a feminist spatial perspective on how carrying operates as a method of engaging with and understanding urban life (Jones, 2024; Puwar, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

This study addresses the limited understanding of how urban environments in China are lived, negotiated, and reshaped through the movements of gendered subjects. To explore this, I adopt a feminist methodological

approach in which carrying functions as both a conceptual lens and a research framework. It highlights the relational dynamics between bodies, objects, and urban space, showing how these interactions incrementally shape and transform the built environment.

To investigate daily carrying practices, I conducted six months of ethnographic fieldwork in a dense residential neighbourhood in Beijing. I combined participant observation, walking, and immersion in everyday routines, accompanying residents to markets, schools, and communal courtyards, and attending closely to bodily gestures, movement rhythms, and the objects they carried. Daily fieldnotes recorded actions, social interactions, spatial arrangements, and informal adaptations to infrastructure.

My methodology also included sketching, photography, and storytelling to capture the relational and material dimensions of carrying. Engaging as both observer and embodied participant allowed me to experience how bodies negotiate space, care, and adaptation—practices often overlooked in formal urban analysis. The resulting narratives and visual records trace how carrying connects people, objects, and infrastructures across the home, neighbourhood, and city.

This approach aligns with feminist methodologies that treat the body as a site of knowledge production (Beebejaun, 2017; Puwar, 2021). Carrying is not merely descriptive; it serves as a feminist method of critical spatial practice, revealing the rhythms of everyday life, the labour of care, and the ongoing negotiation of urban space in contemporary China.

STORIES OF CARRYING

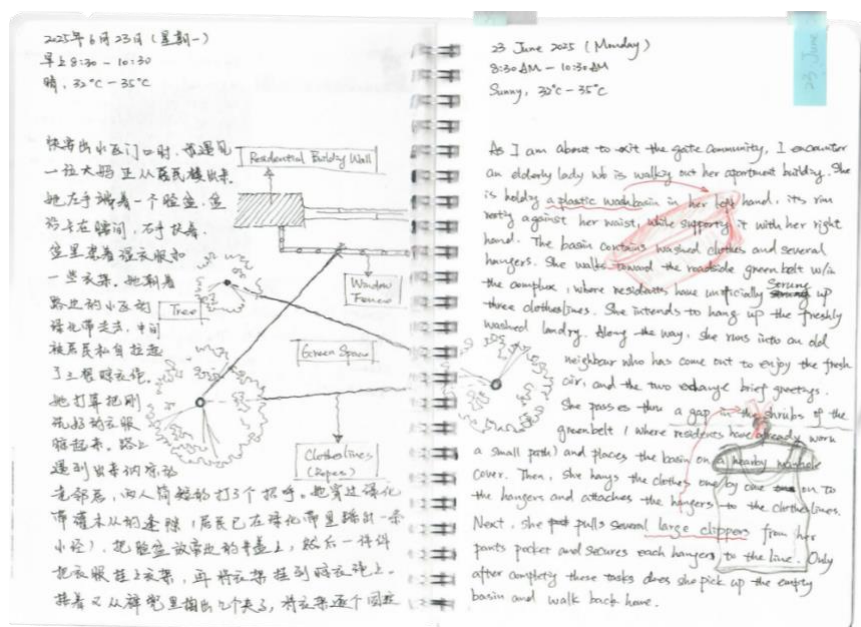
My field site is a residential neighbourhood in northern Beijing that accommodates a diverse mix of urban inhabitants, including long-term residents, rural-to-urban migrants, and people of different ages, occupations, and social backgrounds. The neighbourhood comprises a range of residential compounds alongside community infrastructures such as schools, markets, and small businesses that support residents' everyday needs. In such a setting, carrying practices are both intensive and indispensable for sustaining daily life. A traditional Chinese phrase, 衣食住行 (*yī shí zhù xíng*), encapsulates the four essential aspects of living: clothing, food, dwelling, and transportation. Based on my ethnographic observations, carrying practices play a crucial role in all of these domains.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I closely traced residents' carrying activities on a near-daily basis, collecting multiple stories by accompanying individuals as they moved through their daily routines and navigated the neighbourhood's spaces. These encounters revealed not only the material and practical dimensions of carrying but also the ways in which personal experiences and embodied movements continually reshape the surrounding environment. To illustrate this, I have selected four stories from my ethnographic fieldnotes, each corresponding to one of the four "essential aspects of everyday living," to show how carrying sustains and redefines urban life in practice.

楼宇间的晾衣线 (Clotheslines between buildings)

Figure 1

Fieldnotes taken by the author on 23 June 2025



Fieldnotes, 23 June 2025:

As I am about to exit the gated community, I encounter an elderly woman who is walking out her apartment building. She is holding a plastic washbasin in her left hand, its rim resting against her waist, while supporting it with her right hand. The basin contains washed clothes and several hangers. She walks toward the roadside greenbelt within the complex, where residents have unofficially strung up three clotheslines. She intends to hang up the freshly washed laundry. Along the way, she runs into an old neighbour who has come out to enjoy the cool air, and the two exchange brief greetings. She passes through a gap in the shrubs of the greenbelt (where residents have already worn a small path) and places the basin on a nearby manhole cover. Then, she hangs the clothes one by one onto the hangers and attaches the hangers to the clothesline. Next, she pulls several large clips from her pants pocket and secures each hanger to the line. Only after completing these tasks does she pick up the empty basin and walk back home.

The fieldnote (Figure 1) example above captures the details of local residents carrying laundry, a practice repeated by many people on every sunny day and seamlessly woven into the rhythms of everyday life in urban China.

During my fieldwork in Beijing, I walked through numerous gated communities (小区, *Xiǎo Qū* in Chinese), and almost all of them contain multiple self-installed clotheslines as well as communal laundry drying areas set up by the local community committee. Self-installed clotheslines—strung between trees, lampposts, window railings, or fences—have been a familiar feature of urban residential life for as long as I can remember. In recent years, many compounds have gradually added formal communal drying areas. These facilities are usually initiated and organised by local community Party organisations and funded through “community service” budgets, with informational signs indicating which Party body constructed them and under what budget.

For many urban residents in China, drying laundry is not confined to the domestic interior. To speed up drying and based on the widespread belief that sunlight disinfects and sterilises, residents routinely take freshly washed laundry outdoors. However, many modern residential compounds did not originally include designated communal drying areas. Consequently, residents improvise, setting up clotheslines on trees, lampposts, window railings, and perimeter fences. Over time, the widespread presence of these self-installed lines has drawn the attention of neighbourhood committees, prompting the later creation of formal communal drying areas. Even so, privately installed clotheslines remain in active use, producing a layered everyday landscape in which new and old infrastructures, formal and informal practices, coexist and intertwine. This everyday negotiation between personal habit and communal facilities illustrates how urban residents actively shape and adapt their environments, revealing the subtle yet pervasive ways in which everyday practices configure urban space in contemporary Beijing.

早市² (Grocery shopping and the morning market)

Figure 2

Fieldnotes taken by the author on 16 July 2025



¹ *Xiǎo Qū* (小区) refers to the residential community in China, typically consisting of multiple apartment buildings grouped within a defined, often gated area. These communities can vary in size and may include amenities such as parks, shops, and communal spaces, creating a distinct, self-contained environment for residents.

² *Zǎo Shì* (早市) refers to the early morning farmers' market, which is a temporary space set up each morning in the market's parking lot, where local vendors gather to sell fresh vegetables and fruits. Once the market closes, vendors pack up any remaining goods into their trucks, and the space is cleared out, returning to its function as a parking lot.

Fieldnotes, 16 July 2025:

Nearing eleven o'clock, I am heading toward the nearby morning market. On the way, I encounter two middle-aged to elderly women walking ahead of me, also going in the direction of the market. One is carrying a blue promotional bag (printed with an advertisement for a nearby dental clinic), while the other is pulling a small shopping trolley, also branded with an advertisement, and has a small crossbody bag slung over her shoulder. Their bags and trolley appear to be simple, inexpensive giveaways from businesses, practical for carrying groceries. Yet both women are dressed quite elegantly—wearing tasteful hats, lightweight cardigans, and low-beeled shoes. Even though they are just out shopping for groceries with a friend, they look neat and well-dressed. Walking side by side, they chat and laugh softly along the way, looking relaxed and cheerful.

Upon reaching the market, they slow down and discuss which area to visit first for shopping. One says, "I'll look for XX vegetables, they should be ahead..." They then walk slowly into the market, glancing left and right at the produce and prices as they go. They stop at one stall and first ask the vendor about the prices. As noon approaches and the market nears closing time, the vegetables begin to drop in price. Vendors call out loudly to attract customers, while occasionally tidying up the vegetables or containers on their stalls. The vendor hands them plastic bags, invites them to pick freely, and repeatedly emphasises that his produce is of excellent quality, with the discount offered only because he is about to close for the day. Smiling and nodding, the women begin selecting items carefully but unhurriedly, eventually placing the chosen vegetables into their own bags and cart. They do not buy much, instead, they stroll through the entire market as if they were out for a walk, simply picking up some fresh vegetables along the way.

During the morning rush hour, the streets outside the neighbourhood teem with commuters heading to cars, buses, bicycles, and metro stations. Yet just around the corner, another kind of crowd gathers—slower, but no less bustling. It is the morning market, coming alive as early as 6 a.m. Each day, small vans and trucks arrive laden with fresh fruit and vegetables. Vendors set up makeshift tents and tables in the parking lot, their voices carrying across the square as they call out prices and bargains.

The scene captured in the above fieldnote (Figure 2) occurs almost every morning, revealing the details of how local residents carry groceries, an essential practice that transforms life-sustaining resources from the public market to the home. On weekdays, the market quickly fills with elderly residents, most carrying oversized shopping bags slung over their shoulders or pulling trolleys that bump steadily across the uneven pavement. Unlike commuters, their movements are unhurried yet purposeful, directed toward securing the freshest produce at the best prices.

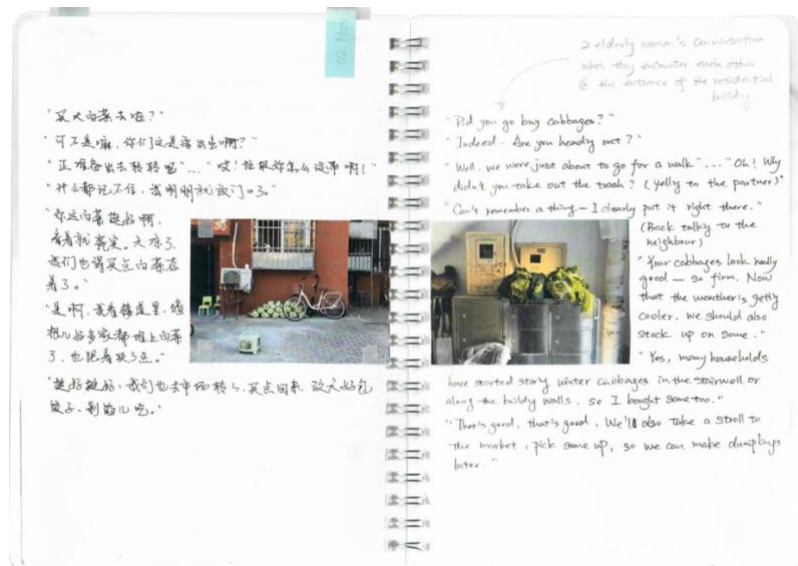
Like the example above, many customers are shopping in groups. The morning market, perhaps for many local residents, is more than a site for purchasing vegetables; it is also a vital arena of social life, particularly for elderly residents. Here, they not only secure supplies for their families but also engage in daily outdoor exercise, meet friends and relatives, and affirm their sense of belonging to the community.

Bags and trolleys are not merely tools for transporting food—they also embody a material connection between household needs and urban infrastructures of supply. The act of carrying—pulling, lifting, weighing, and redistributing—stitches together the bodily labour of shopping with the wider logistical flows that bring produce from rural fields to urban tables. The visible presence of care work at the market—feeding families, sustaining everyday life—makes clear that domestic labour is never fully contained within the home. Instead, it circulates across public and private spaces, leaving behind material traces in the very bags, trolleys, and routines that sustain the rhythms of urban life.

居住的气息 (The spatiality and materiality of urban dwelling)

Figure 3

Fieldnotes taken by the author on 02 November 2025



Fieldnotes, 02 November 2025:

An elderly woman holding two large napa cabbages in her arms, on her way home, runs into another elderly woman at the entrance of their building. The two stop and chat casually.

"Did you go buy cabbages?"

"Indeed. Are you heading out?"

"We were just about to go for a walk"... "Oh! Why didn't you take out the trash?" The woman about to leave suddenly calls out loudly to her husband, who had just stepped outside. The old man pauses, then turns back to grab the trash bag left by the door.

"Can't remember a thing—I clearly put it right here," the woman mutters softly, shaking her head.

"Your cabbages look really good—so firm. Now that the weather's getting cooler, we should also stock up on some."

"Yes, many households have started storing winter cabbages in the stairwell or along the building walls, so I bought some too."

"That's good, that's good. We'll also take a stroll to the market, pick some up, so we can make dumplings and minced filling later."

In the shared spaces of the multi-unit residential buildings (单元楼, DānYuánLóu³ in Chinese), such as stairwells and corridor walls, it is common to see personal belongings occupying these areas. Children's toys, cleaning tools such as mops and brooms, bicycles and scooters, and—as in the case described above—winter cabbages stored on or beside mailboxes, frequently appear in these semi-public spaces (Figure 3).

Such practices are often framed in public discourse as "social ills" or undesirable behaviours that misuse communal space and disrupt order (澎湃新闻, 2026). Others, however, view them as largely harmless and even as expressions of the everyday liveliness of life, revealing the warmth and density of lived urban experience. Rather than adjudicating whether these practices are right or wrong, this article approaches them as an urban phenomenon that merits careful attention.

Seen through a feminist and phenomenological lens, the presence of personal items in shared residential spaces signals how dwelling extends beyond the private interior of the home. Stairwells and corridors function not only as circulation spaces but as thresholds of everyday life, where domestic activities overflow into collective environments. These material traces—cabbages awaiting storage, tools left within reach, toys temporarily abandoned—carry the rhythms of care, maintenance, and seasonal preparation into shared space, shaping the atmosphere of dwelling.

Rather than being passive backdrops, these shared spaces are continuously produced through everyday practices of placing, storing, carrying, and retrieving. Such acts reveal how urban residents actively negotiate limited domestic space and daily labour, particularly in older residential buildings where storage and living space are constrained. In this sense, what is often dismissed as disorder or informality can be understood as a situated response to material conditions, and as part of the lived spatial logic of urban China.

早高峰中的小电驴 (*E-scooters in the morning rush*)

Figure 4

Fieldnotes taken by the author on 26 June 2025



³ DānYuánLóu (单元楼) is a specific residential building type common in urban China, referring to a multi-storey apartment building divided into several "units" and each organised around a shared stairwell (and sometimes a lift). Each unit typically serves a small number of households per floor, with apartments accessed from a common stair landing.

Fieldnotes, 26 June 2025:

Just after seven in the morning, during the morning rush hour around the residential neighbourhood, the main roads are crowded with vehicles, and the bicycle lanes are busy with a continuous flow of e-bikes, private bicycles, and shared bikes moving quickly through the traffic. This time of day is particularly congested near middle and high schools, as many parents are dropping off their children. Since cars are not allowed to stop for long periods at school gates, many parents choose to park a little further away and let their children walk the remaining distance into the campus. Many students also ride bicycles to school, carrying their schoolbags either on their shoulders or in the front baskets of their bikes. I saw a father and his daughter each riding a shared bike—the daughter in front, the father following closely behind. At the school gate, the daughter parked her bike by the roadside, and the father took the schoolbag out of his basket and handed it to her. Only after seeing her enter the school did he turn and ride off, preparing to transfer to the subway. Around eight o'clock, more young parents on e-bikes appear in the bicycle lanes. They carry their children in small seats attached between their legs, taking them to elementary schools or kindergartens. Passing by a nearby kindergarten, I encountered two older women, one of whom was pulling a small toy pedal car. Each carried a tote bag on her shoulder; they seemed to have just dropped off their grandchildren and were now walking back together. They chatted and laughed as they made their way to a nearby morning market, strolling slowly along the stalls and selecting fresh vegetables. As their tote bags gradually filled with produce, the woman hung the items that no longer fit on the toy pedal car, pulling and pushing it along as she continued shopping.

In Beijing, the busiest routes during rush hour are often those surrounding schools. Outside the school gates, the morning scene repeats in variations: parents arrive on foot, on bicycles, or on scooters, slowing down to hand over bags, adjust collars, or watch their children disappear into the schoolyard. These exchanges are brief yet intimate—a fleeting moment in which the domestic life of the household intersects with public space. Within minutes, the street transforms again. Parents remount their bikes or scooters, now without children but still bearing the responsibilities of work, errands, or the next stage of their day.

In this context, multiple forms of transportation—feet, bicycles, scooters, private cars, and public transit—mediate the movement of both children and their guardians (Figure 4). Children are carried to school in one set of tools, while the parents themselves are transported onward, linking domestic care with the rhythms of urban mobility.

These moments show how carrying extends beyond simply holding or moving objects—it also involves transporting people, negotiating space, and coordinating daily rhythms. In Beijing's morning school rush, carrying is inseparable from mobility: parents' guide children along crowded streets, navigate bicycles and scooters through traffic, and coordinate their own onward journeys to work or errands. Each act of transport—whether a child on a bike seat, groceries in a tote, or a backpack swung over the shoulder—requires attentiveness to bodies, urban infrastructures, and temporal pressures. Carrying becomes a relational practice, embedded in the routines of everyday life, through which urban residents actively move, manage, and sustain both household and social life.

NOTES ON CARRYING

In 衣食住行 (*yī shí zhù xíng*), the four essential aspects of living in Chinese urban life: clothing, food, dwelling, and transportation, the practices of carrying are deeply entangled. From laundry baskets to shopping trolleys, strollers to scooters, carrying weaves through the socio-spatial practices that sustain life in urban China. My ethnographic observations, gathered through daily encounters and slow attention to ordinary gestures, show that carrying is not simply about moving objects from one place to another. It is about sustaining bodies, maintaining households, and reshaping the social and spatial fabric of the city.

衣 (clothing). In gated communities, clotheslines stretched between trees, lampposts, or fences make visible the labour of domestic maintenance. Carrying damp garments down stairwells and into semi-public courtyards produces temporary landscapes of laundry, extending the private interior into shared spaces. These acts reorder the use of communities, transforming them into extensions of the home while revealing the often-invisible labour of care. Laundry, in this sense, is not only functional but also spatial, shaping the everyday environment of the community.

食 (food). At the morning farmers' market, elderly adults with shopping bags and wheeled trolleys enact another dimension of carrying: the bodily work of pulling, lifting, and redistributing food from vendor tables to household kitchens. These repeated movements connect domestic kitchens with broader circuits of urban supply, linking intimate family meals with the logistical infrastructures that bring produce from rural fields to urban tables. The rhythms of carrying here are inseparable from the rhythms of feeding, both material and social.

住 (dwelling). In the semi-public spaces of urban dwellings in China, personal and domestic items blur the boundary between private and collective space. Dwelling is not limited to the apartment itself; it is enacted through what is carried, placed, and stored. These traces of everyday life make visible the rhythms of care, maintenance, and seasonal preparation, showing how domestic practices extend into shared spaces and actively shape the material and social atmosphere of urban residential life.

行 (transportation). Carrying in the context of mobility extends beyond objects to people. Morning school commutes—children on e-scooters or bicycles, schoolbags and essentials in tow—illustrate the relational and temporal coordination involved in moving bodies through urban space. Carrying here mediates between domestic care and urban infrastructure, linking household responsibilities to the city's transportation systems. These routines reveal how mobility, care, and material transport are inseparable practices that structure daily life and produce relational urban space.

Across these scenes, carrying emerges as a practice that crosses thresholds—between private and public, household and neighbourhood, domestic and urban. It makes visible the embodied labour that sustains everyday life, much of which is feminised or otherwise overlooked in official narratives of urban development. To pay attention to carrying is to notice how ordinary gestures hold together the constantly make/unmake/remake urban spaces: how bodies, bags, strollers, scooters, and ropes stretch across space to keep lives connected and in motion.

Carrying, then, is never a neutral act of moving something or someone from one place to another; it is a spatial practice that threads and reconfigures the relation between bodies, spaces, and the urban. At the micro scale, it is expressed in the weight of a schoolbag on a parent's back, the careful balance of groceries in a trolley, or the repetitive movement of laundry pegged to a rope. These bodily gestures appear ordinary but are essential to sustaining life, and they continually reshape the use of space: stairwells that become laundry routes, parking lots that turn into playgrounds, sidewalks that double as scooter parking zones.

At the scale of the household, carrying mediates the circulation of resources—food, water, clothing, childcare—between the inside and outside. The home cannot be sustained without these flows, yet these flows also mean that domestic life spills into semi-public courtyards, neighbourhood markets, and transport nodes. Carrying thus unsettles the conventional boundary of the private home, showing that “dwelling” is not contained within four walls but woven through movements that extend across shared spaces.

At the neighbourhood level, these acts of carrying stitch together social relations. The repetitive encounters at morning markets or daily conversations in the stairwells, where neighbours exchange greetings, swap advice, or simply coexist in proximity. Carrying objects—groceries, children, laundry—becomes entangled with carrying relationships, a form of social maintenance that sustains community life.

At the macro scale of the city, carrying ties everyday labour to the larger systems of urban infrastructure and governance. Parents who deliver their children to school on e-scooters and then continue their commute connect household responsibilities to the transit system. Elderly residents pulling vegetables home from informal markets rely on, yet also extend beyond, the formal distribution networks of the city. These practices illustrate what Chinese scholars have described as *Sheng Huo Jian She* (生活建设, a planning approach that recognises daily living as a core dimension of urban development. In recent years, this has been institutionalised through initiatives such as the “15-minute community life circle” (15分钟社区生活圈), which aims to provide residents with access to essential services for daily life within a short walking distance (Cheng, 2021; Huiming et al., 2021). Parallel discourses on the “life-oriented city” (生活导向城市) (黄晴, 2025) and the “livable city” (宜居城市) (Zhang, 2016) further illustrate how urban planning in China has increasingly turned toward everyday practices as the measure of spatial justice and quality of life.

Carrying, as a specific feminist spatial practice, is what holds urban life together. It reveals how gendered bodies navigate, negotiate, and remake their environments through detailed, repetitive, and relational acts that sustain both domestic and public life. Carrying reconfigures the very spaces it moves through—stretching across thresholds between home and street, informal and formal economies, intimate care and large-scale infrastructure. To pay attention to carrying in urban China is therefore to recognise an alternative mode of spatial production: one not oriented toward spectacle or growth, but grounded in the everyday maintenance of life itself.

CONCLUDING MARKS

This article has traced everyday practices of carrying in a residential neighbourhood in Beijing to reflect on how urban life is sustained, negotiated, and reshaped through ordinary, embodied actions. Rather than approaching urban space as a fixed container or a product of formal planning alone, the study has shown how small, repetitive acts—hanging laundry, pulling shopping trolleys, storing household items in shared spaces, escorting children through dense morning traffic—incrementally configure the spatial and social life of the city.

Across the four domains of 衣食住行 (clothing, food, dwelling, and transport), the ethnographic material reveals carrying as a relational practice that links bodies, objects, infrastructures, and rhythms of daily life. These practices are not spectacular or overtly political, yet their cumulative effects are spatially consequential. They extend domestic labour beyond the private interior, activate semi-public spaces such as stairwells, courtyards, and markets, and connect household care with broader urban systems of supply, mobility, and governance. In this sense, carrying operates as a quiet but persistent mode through which urban space is lived, maintained, and subtly transformed.

One of the key insights emerging from this study is that carrying foregrounds forms of labour that are often rendered ordinary, feminised, or invisible within dominant narratives of urban development. Attending to these practices shifts analytical focus away from large-scale interventions toward the embodied work that sustains everyday life. It also complicates conventional distinctions between private and public, formal and informal, showing how urban dwelling is produced through continual negotiation at their boundaries. The spatiality of urban life, as observed here, is not only planned or regulated but repeatedly enacted through care, maintenance, and adaptation.

At the same time, this research opens up further questions. While the analysis has focused on the material and spatial dimensions of carrying, the metaphorical and affective aspects of carrying—highlighted in feminist theory as central to how bodies bear memories, responsibilities, and social relations—remain only partially explored here. How feelings of burden, attachment, obligation, or reassurance are carried alongside objects and people, and how these affective dimensions shape spatial experience, would require deeper and longer-term engagement with participants' narratives and embodied memories. Future research could extend this work through longitudinal ethnography, participatory methods, or comparative studies across different cities and social groups to examine how meanings of carrying shift across life stages, household arrangements, and urban contexts.

By foregrounding carrying as an everyday spatial practice, this article suggests an alternative way of understanding urban space in contemporary China—one grounded not in spectacle or growth, but in the ongoing work of sustaining life. Paying attention to these modest practices makes visible how urban environments are continuously made and remade through embodied labour, and how feminist perspectives can contribute to a more situated and relational understanding of urban life.

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Ethical statement

This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the University of Manchester. Ethical approval for the ethnographic fieldwork was granted by the Environment, Education & Development PGR School Panel at the University of Manchester (Ref: 2025-22074-40863) prior to the commencement of fieldwork.

Competing interests

The author declares that there are no competing interests.

Author contributions

XL is the sole author of this article and was responsible for the conceptualization, research design, ethnographic fieldwork, data collection, analysis, and writing of the manuscript.

Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study consist primarily of ethnographic fieldnotes, sketches, and observational documentations generated by the author during fieldwork in Beijing, China. Selected images of fieldnotes are included in the article. Due to the sensitive and contextual nature of ethnographic data and to protect participant privacy, the full dataset is not publicly available.

AI disclosure

The author confirms that no artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the development of the research content, analysis, or findings of this manuscript.

Biographical sketch

Xin Li is a PhD candidate in Architecture in the Department of Architecture at the University of Manchester, United Kingdom. She holds a Master's degree in Architecture from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA. Her research explores the concept of carrying within urban infrastructures, re-envisioning infrastructures as spaces of everyday movement, care, and maintenance. Drawing on feminist spatial theory, she develops a "carrier bag approach" to examine the embodied and often overlooked relations between bodies, infrastructures, and urban life. Her research interests include feminist spatial practice, everyday urbanism, and urban infrastructures in contemporary China.

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