Flâneuse from the year 2023: An Ethnographic Study on Women Students' City Walk in Nanjing, China

Master's Thesis

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Word count | 11615 words

Targeted journal | Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION - City Walk and Flâneuse

City Walk, an English phrase that has become a social media sensation in China, represents the hottest travel mode for Chinese people in the post-COVID era (Wu, 2023; Li, 2023). In 2023, more than 3.7 million posts on the social media platform *Xiaohongshu*[1] shared about City Walk and received approximately 2.1 billion views. City Walk in China combines tourism practice with daily mobility and usually manifests as a spontaneous walk or short trip that explores the cities (Wu, 2023). City walkers explore restaurants, look for vintage items/clothes, visit historical architecture, or merely walk for no purpose. *Xiaohongshu City Walk Trend Report*[2] summarises the popularity, key participants and popular destinations of City Walk. Statistics show that from July 2022 to August 2023, users accumulated 320,000 kilometres of walking in various cities, equivalent to circling the earth eight times. Young people between 19 and 28 make up 50 per cent of the city walkers. It is also worth noting that female city walkers accounted for 82 per cent, which is an overwhelming majority compared to men.

Chinese scholars have shown that City Walk offers a new lifestyle for youth groups (Wu, 2023; Sun, 2024). It differs from traditional urban tourism (Li, 2023; Wu, 2023; Sun, 2024), and is closer to the life of spontaneously exploring city streets and public buildings as practised by the British writer Virginia Woolf (Bowlby, 2012; Zhao, 2023). Walking tours in cities globally have long been a common tourism practice (Steinbrink, 2016; Frisch et al., 2019), and these tours have primarily taken place in the form of historical and architectural tours (Giddy & Hoogendoorn, 2018). Developed by professional travel agencies, walking tours mainly follow specific planned routes with a series of tourist attractions and are equipped with trained guides (Li, 2023; Wu 2023). In contrast, City Walk in China emphasise walking as a daily practice through which urban space is made and observed (De Certeau, 1984), thus people have the sensory experience of built environments by bodily mobility (Degen, 2012). Younger generations develop the recognition of urban habitats with leaderless, spontaneous and active walking tours, establishing a deeper connection between young citizens and the urban environment (Sun, 2024).

City Walk presents a picture of young women actively engaging in a "Virginia Woolf-like" slow-paced, immersive walking and leisure activities in cities (Wu, 2023; Zhao, 2024), with social media as a platform for them to share information and experiences (Sun, 2024). The female city walkers not only seemingly resemble flâneuse but also make me wonder if flâneuse, once extremely rare in public space and invisible from literature and history (Wolff, 1985), is now appearing in large numbers in Chinese cities. Dating back to the 19th century, women wandering the city streets in search of pleasure casually would not have been widely possible even though there was already a type of male figure, the flâneur or voyeur, who took pleasure in his role as an urban onlooker (McDowell, 1999). The flâneur is often associated with leisure, privilege, anonymity, and above all, masculinity (Elkin, 2017). Janet Wolff (1985) suggested that people in the 19th century voluntarily embarked on such a transient and unpredictable journey (p.40) were all men. Elizabeth Wilson (1992) counters Woolf's argument by emphasising that the multiplicity and contradictions of urban space provide more opportunities for the presence of female wanderers, flâneuse. Elkin (2017) argues, "*the joy of walking in the city belongs to men and women alike*" (p.11), and advocates the use of the feminine word flâneuse rather than adapting women to masculine concepts.

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[1] *Xiaohongshu* is a Chinese online shopping and social networking platform with 350 million users as of January 2023. Massive product reviews and travel sharing are the platform's featured content. City Walk and its topics initially gained significant popularity here.

[2] *Xiaohongshu City Walk Trend Report*: The gender rate of city walkers: Men - 18% Women - 82%

Contemporary flâneuse remains relevant for research. On the one hand, the male perspective of exploring the city is still dominant in contemporary geographical writings and articles (Jackson, 2021). On the other hand, almost all the research related to City Walk in China so far has ignored the fact that female participants are the majority. Besides, female university students actively engage in City Walk. In *Gender, Identity and Place*, McDowell (1999) describes the significance of the study on flâneuse. The emergence of the flâneuse represents a revolution in the identity of the urban woman that breaks away from traditional femininity; for another, research focused on this topic can help to fill the gap between the exclusion and restriction of women's participation in the public world of politics in the general history of social science (Mowl & Towner, 1995) and geographic thought and the discipline's longstanding neglect of the private sphere (McDowell, 1999). In addition, there is still a massive gap in interpreting the social and cultural significance of women's microspace in Chinese Feminist Geography (Yao et al., 2017). This research will contribute to constructing the capacity and mechanisms of women's self-organisation in the process of spatial production, particularly by peering into the status of young women in urban leisure spaces and the changes in their daily lives. This research views Chinese women through the lens of global feminist development, helping reveal how urbanisation and modernity uniquely manifest in the Chinese context - how female City walkers in Nanjing resemble and differ from the flâneuse in New York, London and Tokyo.

I have chosen Nanjing, a popular City Walk choice that ranks high on the *Xiaohongshu* City Walk Trend Report as my research area. Nanjing is a modern city with a long history. Located in the city centre, the Nanjing University campus is surrounded by a rich cityscape including a variety of commercial and recreational venues. Social media messages also indicate that female university students are a representative group in the City Walk. As a young generation, they have more disposable time and enthusiasm to explore the city. Therefore, I targeted my research on female university students living around the Nanjing University campus. The questions this research attempts to answer are: **How do female students living on the Nanjing University Gulou campus experience and perceive City Walk? Do their behaviours and experiences inject new representations and connotations into Flâneuse?**

Theory and Methodology: Literature review, analysis framework and Empirical Work

1. Literature review

a. Wanderlust: Walking and power

Throughout history, walking has been recognised as a political or critical act for individuals to claim space and assert their presence (Macauley, 2000; Heddon & Turner, 2012). Rebecca Solnit (Solnit, 2001) argues that walking is a means of resistance, a way for marginalised groups to navigate and challenge power structures. Walking can be seen as a form of protest, whether it is through marches, demonstrations, or simply occupying public spaces (Macauley, 2000), particularly when considering the effects of the colonial, racist, and sexist historical scheme (Martinez & Gois, 2022). Indeed, as the most fundamental and immediate way of navigating our surroundings, everyday walking is capable of questioning and transforming the rigidity of such social and political boundaries (Macauley, 2000). In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau (1984) distinguishes between the strategies of people who plan and control urban space and those who navigate and subvert these spaces through everyday practices. Walking disrupts the ordered and controlled spaces designed by those in power, allowing individuals to reclaim agency within the city (Macauley, 2000).

From a feminist perspective, scholars and writers view walking as a feminist practice, highlighting its role in challenging patriarchal structures (Puwar, 2013; Jackson, 2021) and exploring how walking can be a means of empowerment and liberation for women. Walking allows women to claim ownership of their bodies and spaces, resisting the constraints imposed upon them (Roberts & Widger, 2020). Through walking, especially women individuals can resist, subvert, and reimagine the cityscape, contributing to broader discussions about identity and social change.

Related studies in China mainly focus on the attributes of people's walking behaviour and the built environment where the walking is approximately situated. Chan et al. (2019) examined the interaction effects of objective and subjective dimensions of the built environment on walking behaviour in the Chinese cities' rapidly developing context. Lyu and Forsyth (2021) slightly touch on the variation of attitudes and odds of walking between genders in studying attitudes, perceptions, and walking behaviour in a Chinese city. A huge research gap exists in the ethnographic study of walking behaviour in China, focusing in particular on the role and critique value of walking practice as a protest to the existing socio-spatial order.

b. Flâneuse

The concept of the "flâneuse" has shifted from the feminisation of the term flâneur and a change in academia from believing that female wanderers don't exist to this statement being challenged. Baudelaire first described in 1863 in *The Painter of Modern Life* the pleasure that every inhabitant of Paris appreciates but rapidly disappearing, that is, the body in a state of aimlessness connectedness to the city yet maintaining an attitude of seclusion. Women's ability to move about is limited because they are subject to social expectations and thus tend to experience the city differently from men (Wolff, 1985). Wolff's (1985) view of the flâneur reveals the gendered nature of urban modernity. However, her argument is countered by Elizabeth Wilson (1992) and others who claim that the city has given women more freedom in the form of weakened binary gender divisions and class ties. In related writings

from this century, Solnit (2001), in *Wanderlust: History of Walking*, talks about the experiences of women who ventured alone into the city, and even walking as a female act of resistance and subversion of the body's control in the public square. The women as flâneuse have no families, usually no men, and have undoubtedly escaped the monotony of domesticity, which can be summed up by saying that they are outside the traditional boundaries of femininity (Heron, 1993).

The richness in flâneuse helps to disassociate female wanderers from masculine notions (Elkin, 2017) and continues to influence the way contemporary urban observation is written from a still predominantly male perspective in Geography (Jackson, 2021). Lauren Elkin (2017) explores how women navigate and experience urban space and focuses on how women want to be seen. By shadowing, marching, observing, and documenting women's responses to different cities, she establishes for the reader a connection between the past and present. Numerous scholars have combined ethnography and analysis of historical documents and visual materials (Kramer & Short, 2011; Elkin, 2017; Kern, 2021), allowing the Flâneuse to gain prominence in feminist geography literature, offering a perspective on women's experiences in urban spaces. However, the notion of the flâneuse is rooted in the specific sociocultural and historical contexts of Western cities during the Modernist period (Roberts & Widger, 2020). It is crucial to acknowledge that women's experiences in non-Western contexts may have been shaped by different cultural, social, and political factors, leading to distinct manifestations of resistance and reclamation of public spaces.

Research on flâneuse in China begins to appear in the 21st century, with a relatively small number of studies focusing on analyses of the image of the flâneuse in literature and film (Huang, 2001; Yi, 2020). By analysing paintings and sculptures by female artists, Zeng (2020) shows how contemporary female artists in Hong Kong play the role of flâneuse. Generally, Chinese flâneuse studies lack a focus on the practical logic of women's everyday world spheres, downplaying the processes and mechanisms of women's constructions in these spaces (Yao et al., 2017). In particular, The only research on women's participation in leisure activities in public spaces in recent ten years (Jin & Whitson, 2014) suggests that women's presence does not challenge gendered expectations, but rather that their leisure behaviours and experiences contribute to reinforcing social norms that masculinise public leisure spaces. Nevertheless, recent research on City Walk in China has revealed hints of a connection between City walkers and flâneuse. Several scholars have argued that City Walk in China originated in London, England (Zhao, 2023; Li, 2023; Wu, 2023), most notably in the lifestyle of British writer Virginia Woolf who is a historically known image of flâneuse (Tseng, 2006; Bowlby, 2012; Reeves, 2019) exploring the city's streets and drawing inspiration and interest for her writing (Zhao, 2023). Similarly, Wu (2023) elaborates that city walkers are individuals who explore and appreciate urban culture and landscapes as daily practices, embracing freedom and alleviating loneliness at minimal cost. He maintains, "*City walk inherently carries qualities of romance, social interaction and healing.*" However, none of these scholars have analysed the Chinese city walker population from a gender perspective despite the fact that women are disproportionately represented in the City Walk group.

c. Social media, gender and space

In the 1990s, some cyberfeminists argued that Internet technology was inherently suited to women's ways of thinking and being (Plant & Sadie, 1998). Community building is something that women are naturally good at (Zoonen, 2001) and the Internet can be a space for organising, theorising, sharing experiences and making sense of oneself with great potential for women (Wajcman, 2007). However, the Internet has not brought about an end to male heterosexism (Marwick, 2013). Boyd and

Ellison (2007) describe social media as a reproducing space where male hegemony still prevails. Looking at interactions and exchanges on social media from a gender perspective reveals patterns of encouraged and discouraged behaviour across genders. For example, displays involving consumption, pictures and short texts are seen as a feminine technology, while knowledge sharing is considered masculine (Marwick, 2013). Liu (2023) examines the construction of gender norms on the Chinese Internet through *WeChat*. She finds that different forms and contents of gender norms are evident in women's experiences, whether it is the patriarchal over-emphasis on women's appearance and body image, or the male gaze culture that turns social media into a way of objectifying women.

With the development of social media and location technology, media that incorporates features such as text and image display and location have attracted a large number of female users. Convergent social media represented by *Xiaohongshu* plays a fundamental role in the popularity of City Walk. Tourists participating in the City Walk share their experiences on social media either in pictures or text, reshaping the image of the destination (Wu, 2023). With the intervention of social media, the city demonstrates the potential of communicability and allows individuals to accomplish cognitive and emotional attunement in their interaction with the city (Sun, 2024). Liu (2021) finds that when *Xiaohongshu* users view visual images on social media, they tend to focus on composition, facial expressions, poses, and scenes in other people's portraits. Semi-professional celebrities and institutional entrepreneurs drive young people to associate their bodies with popular locations and allow them to attempt to find, build and maintain an audience (Kozinets et al, 2017). Still, Hjorth (2013) highlights a lack of academic attention to the ways in which locative media practices are gendered, and the socio-cultural influences on gender.

2. Analysis Framework

My main hypothesis is that the female city walker resembles Elkin's (2017) flâneuse reimagining the traditionally male figure of the flâneur to include women's experiences of wandering and observing urban spaces. First, by claiming the city streets as their own, they **defy societal expectations and expand the scope of space exploration**. Second, they discover people and things that are marginalised or invisible in the city from a traditionally male perspective through **female perspectives and alternative narratives**. However, the **visibility and invisibility** of women in public space has changed drastically due to the change of times and the popularity of City Walk on Chinese social media. As a result, female city walkers may not be as flâneuse of the past that their presence in public spaces is rendered invisible by societal norms and power structures that have historically excluded women from freely occupying urban environments.

I develop the analysis and presentation of the results in three sections: **Resistance and exploration**; **Observation and narrative**; and **Visibility and invisibility**. In the first two sections, I present more of the participants' City Walk experiences and their perceptions of City Walk in order to answer my first research question. In the third part, I will specifically focus on the new public femininity brought about by social media and its impact on the visibility and invisibility of female city walkers. This part may be able to show the new connotations and representations that city walkers have injected into the concept of flaneuse. However, this does not mean that the first two sections cannot reflect the new features of city walkers' identity and walking behaviour. Meanwhile, I pay attention to the narratives and attitudes of each participant, including the parts of their identity that are not similar to that of flâneuse, and present them as realistically as possible.

3. Empirical work

a. Go-along interview

To answer my research question, I used the research method of go-along interviews. Go-along interviews are commonly employed in qualitative research and hold significant relevance in Feminist Geography studies due to their ability to illuminate the embodied experiences of individuals within spatial contexts (Zavattaro, 2019). Originating from environmental psychology, go-along interviews involve researchers accompanying participants on walks or journeys through their everyday environments, encouraging dialogue and reflection on lived experiences, spatial practices, and socio-cultural dynamics (Edwards & Holland, 2013). By engaging in conversations while viewing physical spaces, researchers can gain insights into how gender interacts with specific geographies, revealing individuals' nuanced relationships with their environments. This method facilitates a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between gender, space, and everyday life, ultimately contributing to the broader project of feminist scholarship aimed at challenging and transforming spatial inequalities (McDowell, 2016; England, 1994).

For many ethnographers, accompanying is a more humble, systematic and results-oriented way of hanging out with participants (Kusenbach, 2003). In order to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' City Walk habits, I asked each participant to organise a City Walk of no less than one hour according to their daily walking habits, and I completed the interviews while walking with them.

b. Research area and participant recruitment

According to *Xiaohongshu City Walk Trend Report*, Nanjing is the seventh most popular city for City Walk in China. The chosen Nanjing University (NJU for short) Gulou campus is located in the city centre with a history of over 100 years. The peripheral space of the old campus has intricate streets and dense commercial and cultural facilities, reflecting a noisy street feeling full of retro atmosphere. Based on personal experience, such rich and accessible places of pleasure provide excellent short-distance City Walk options for students, thus bringing diverse analytical details for research. There are also abundant posts on the *Xiaohongshu* about the City Walk marked around Nanjing University Gulou Campus.

I placed advertisements and recruited participants through snowballing methods on *Xiaohongshu* and Nanjing University forums. I required that all participants meet the following requirements: 1) attend NJU and reside on the NJU Gulou Campus; 2) consider themselves to have participated in City Walk. In October and November 2023, I recruited ten female students living on the Gulou Campus of NJU as planned and obtained permission from them to arrange the interviews. I have listed the interviewees in the order in which they were interviewed, numbering them from **P1** to **P10**. I also pseudonymised each participant and referred to them by their number and pseudonym throughout the paper so that the reader could create a simple impression of each participant. Here I briefly introduce the background of the ten participants:

P1- **Lu**: PhD student; originally from central China; has been living in Nanjing for more than three years; learnt about and participated in this study through *Xiaohongshu*.

P2 - **Xiange**: Bachelor student; originally from North China; has been living in Nanjing for more than three years; learnt about and participated in this study through snowballing.

P3 - **Pan**: Bachelor student; originally from central China; has been living in Nanjing for less than one year; learnt about and participated in this study through snowballing.

P4 - **Zhongyao**: Bachelor student; originally from south-west China; has been living in Nanjing for more than three years; learnt about and participated in this study through snowballing.

P5 - **Coco**: PhD student; originally from east China; has been living in Nanjing for more than three years; learnt about and participated in this study through university forum.

P6 - **Lei**: Master student; originally from north-west China; has been living in Nanjing for about one year; learnt about and participated in this study through university forum.

P7 - **Jia**: PhD student; originally from east China; has been living in Nanjing for more than three years; learnt about and participated in this study through university forum.

P8 - **Tang**: Bachelor student; originally from central China; has been living in Nanjing for less than one year; learnt about and participated in this study through snowballing.

P9 - **Zhu**: Master student; originally from Nanjing; learnt about and participated in this study through snowballing.

P10 - **Wen**: Bachelor student; originally from east China; has been living in Nanjing for less than one year; learnt about and participated in this study through university forum.

Due to the snowballing methodology, four of the ten participants are from the School of Architecture and Urban Planning at Nanjing University. The information they provided enriched the narratives and observations of urban space from a female perspective. However, there might be bias in the findings by creating stereotypes of city walkers associated with urban-related professionals.

c. Data Collection

In total, I collected fifteen and a half hours of audio recordings and ten walking route trajectories.

The interview was divided into six sections. 1) First, I asked the participants to describe their plans for the day's City Walk (I informed them to organise the walking route before each go-along interview), including the neighbourhoods they might pass through and their familiarity with those areas. 2) At each fork in the road or stopping point, I asked them about their reasons for going in a certain direction or stopping. 3) I learnt about their usual walking habits, such as whether they tended to travel alone or in a group and the scope and duration of their trips. I also asked them about the activities they would like to do during the City Walk, such as shopping, dining or other entertaining. 4) I tried to find out their perceptions of the city through City Walk. For example, what kind of neighbourhoods attract or repel them? What impression did they have of the city of Nanjing? 5) They were guided to share their views on the popularity of the City Walk, especially how they relate and compare their personal walking experiences with the styles other female City Walkers presented on the Internet. 6) I asked them to look into the future and consider whether City Walk would be a part of their desired future life. Throughout the interviews, I encouraged participants to share their stories. More than just the experience of walking in the city, I attempted to explore the connection between these experiences and their personal lives.

d. Ethical considerations

The researcher takes responsibility for ethically using the research process to facilitate generative participant self-reflection on their perceptions and interpretations of life experiences. It is necessary to identify the role of a go-along interview leader, clearly define my role as a researcher, understand the boundaries of what participants felt uncomfortable with and develop a plan for coping with particular situations. As the researcher, I am always vigilant in avoiding projecting my own experiences on others while also recognising that it can be a valuable means of building trust and collaborative insight (Berger, 2015). The study ensures that the research process is conducted fairly, non-exploitative and thoughtfully. When recruiting interviewees, all will be informed that the information used as data collection for analysis and that individuals volunteered to decide whether or not to participate in the study. The above statement guarantees the participants' right to informed consent, as well as their right to self-determination, and ensures the anonymity and security of the study. Additionally, I pseudonymized each participant rather than simply referring to them by a series of numbers. These pseudonyms came from their online nicknames. As an ethnographic study, this allows the reader to better establish an understanding of the participants and makes the participants' narratives more vivid.

Results: Flâneuse in City Walk

1. Resistance and Exploration

This section will present the motivations and feelings of city walkers when they participate in the City Walk, referencing Elkin's (2017) focus on the theme of flâneuse defying social norms and how their personal experiences influence creative practice. In conjunction with the participants' oral narratives, I dig into whether there were signs of resistance in their walks and what kind of social norms or expectations were defied. From the results, the participants' responses reflect many details about their personal growth and the expanding boundaries of their exploration of urban space.

Stepping out is a strong need for individuals when spatially confined. In 2023 China, the lockdown policy during the pandemic had a huge impact on students. Most of the management of high schools and universities was confining students to their homes or campuses. Nowadays, City Walk is popularised in the context of the end of the lockdown policy. **Pan** states, "I was locked up in the previous three years of the COVID, and very much needed to go out to relax." However, **Pan** also adds that the pandemic was not the root cause of limiting her range of activities. Without the pandemic, the heavy academic pressure of high school would not have allowed her to fulfil her need to travel. Similar situations are invariably found in the youngest of the participants, including **Pan** and **Tang**, who are freshmen, and **Wen** who is sophomores. Their narratives reveal that three years of high school had limited their space of activities and scarcity of leisure time, which contributed to the tremendous physical and mental stress they had experienced. Until they enter the university and gain more freedom in time and space, the haze of the former life constraints still remains. When **Wen** entered Nanjing University, she realised:

> "This campus is too small. The teaching area is as big as the campus was when I was in high school. I felt as if I was still trapped in my high school days of intense studying and depressing moods. This led to my first year of college being completely unmotivated to study hard. I spent more time off campus, barely eating at the cafeteria on campus and often travelling out of campus on weekends. I never let myself get into a low mental state." (**P10 - WEN**)

By contrast, the senior ones, mainly Masters and PhD students (**P1 - Lu, P5 - Coco, P6 - Lei, P7 - Jia, P9 - Zhu**), expressed their worries about entering the workforce, in particular the possibility that they might no longer have enough time and space to walk freely. **Lu** is in her final year before her PhD graduation, which she believes is the most comfortable and best time to use her free time to wander in the city, and she may not have time to do so after work. This concern is not unfounded speculation among university students. **Lei** had an internship where she worked in an industrial area from morning to night, and she had been living like hell every day. Her only daily outing was to come out of the dreary office building for lunch and then back to her desk. When she finally returned to campus after this internship, she returned to a life where she could take a walk every day. "Wanderlust is freedom. It's something I'll always love." **Jia** currently lives a life of doing an internship that doesn't end until ten and studying at the same time, which has led her to "realise something terrible" that she could " potentially sit in the office all day." Although she does not consider herself to be an outdoor person, she still feels the need to go out from time to time. She seized every opportunity for her friends to ask her to go out and increased her time outdoors in this way.

Along with their anxiety about entering the workforce comes the hesitation to construct a family. **Coco** claims that even when her PhD ends, her life will still be a continuation of her previous

commitment to academics and single life. There's no strong motivation for her to start a family. The elders in the workplace of her internship frequently remind her that it is time to start thinking about getting married and having children, which makes her feel like she is expected in ways she doesn't really like. Society invariably pushes everyone to follow a certain path in life, thus imposing age anxiety on young women. Walking aimlessly in the city seems to be an act of resistance to rules and the pursuit of freedom.

> "I clearly sense that there are differences in the mental states of people of different ages. When I was an undergraduate, I was always ready to hang out, but now I need more time to rest after finishing everyday work. Nevertheless, most of the people around me and I still keep the habit of walking. The time when I live with my classmates and colleagues together must be memorable in my entire life. As we get older, we all go to different cities to work and build our homes. Remember, our single life is precious. " (**P9 - Zhu**)

Pan shares her mother's life of leaving the circle of acquaintances and gradually closing off for the family. **Pan**'s mother came to her father's hometown and hasn't formed a sense of belonging to the location of her new home since then. **Pan**'s father still has a lot of socialising and activities outdoors, while her mother is lonely most of the time. "It's a big leap for us to be able to step out so freely compared to previous generations of women. City Walk encourages us to seek our ways of being outdoors," **Pan** maintains.

When asked about their plans for the future, some participants gave clear career goals, others were not sure, but the only certain point was that the ideal future for all participants would be one in which they had enough free time and leisure time to wander, observing what was going on around them. "It can be hard to maintain a life like this," said **Lu**, "sometimes I look at the people rushing on the city streets and feel like everyone is living not like themselves but like a part of the city machine. I hate that." "But no matter what kind of life I lead, I will create space and time for myself to wander in the city," says **Zhu**. Walking implied a sense of freedom and simplicity for these university students who had not yet fully entered the workforce or built a family. Walking can be their rebellion against social expectations and pressures or a temporary escape.

From a specific geospatial perspective, many participants also experienced the transition from small town to big city (Nanjing). Some participants are originally from smaller cities or towns, where the urban form is monotonous and outdated, as well as lacking commercial or recreational facilities. Large cities are rich in built-up environments, diverse facilities and cultures, inspiring enthusiasm for walking in the city. After coming to Nanjing, **Tang** has just begun to explore the city's various events such as concerts and art exhibitions on her own. Not only did she search for a wealth of entertainment venues, but also realised that she could live a happy and carefree life alone from now on. My walking route with **Tang** was in Xuanwu Lake Park. "It is rare for cities to have such a large park built around a natural lake." The beautiful scenery makes her really enjoy living and walking in Nanjing. Regarding future settlements, every participant expresses a preference for living in big cities, especially for female university students from small towns. In addition to more career opportunities and better amenities that big cities can offer, the society in small towns is more likely to force women to succumb to societal expectations and return to the private sphere. Both **Lu** and **Zhongyao** talk about feeling more disciplined about women in their hometowns by their relatives. However, this does not necessarily mean that big cities are the ideal paradise for women's City Walk. The details will be developed in the next section on women's narratives.

Expanding the exploration of space is often tied to the personal growth of the participants. The individualised experiences and narratives also imply the prejudices and limitations that society may have on a particular group of people. **Lu** confesses that as a student who doesn't dress in style and is not financially well-off, she used to feel awkward when walking through malls selling luxury goods. Exposure to different types of urban spaces can and has caused them to experience some distress and tension, but this has been overcome by travelling more. " I adjusted my mind. As a consumer, I have the freedom to spend money or not. Despite the fact that society often judges people by their appearance, nobody can deny me the right to enter any public place." Besides, **Lu** used to be afraid to ride a bicycle on the city streets, believing that the traffic was too dangerous for her to manage. To her own relief, she tried to cycle instead of walking to make her trips more efficient in 2023. At first, she rode slowly and gradually she became bolder. As a result, cycling broadened her travelling considerably and brought her more impressions of the city. In the meantime, there was a deeper shift in her whole life. **Lu** repeatedly talked about her dating and breaking up with her ex-boyfriend and how her travelling habits changed due to the incident.

> "When I was with my ex-boyfriend, he made the travelling plans and took me on his electric scooter to the leisure and entertainment places he arranged. Just a short while ago, we broke up, and now I make my travel plans or interact with strangers. I used to be afraid of socialising and would never go out with strangers. Now I either go out by myself or appear on social media looking for new people on and off campus who I can hang out with. I'm against the social norm that encourages girls to wait for a guy to come and set everything up for her." (**P1 - Lu**)

Not coincidentally, **Lei** found herself more actively hanging out after ending her relationship. Once with her ex-boyfriend, she experienced more of a two-person world and each other's company. "We spent more time sitting in restaurants and talking face-to-face. While going out with my friends when I was single, I experienced the hanging out thing more, focusing more on the urban spaces in my pathway." These two interesting cases seem to fit what Heron (1993) mentions that being amid the flâneuse often separates one from the ordinary images of women in relationships with men.

The participants' plans, frequency, spatial scope of the walks, their moods while walking, and the companions they walk with can be a microcosm of their state of life in a period. With subtle changes in their walking habits, they find themselves transitioning to a new stage of life. **Xiange** shares her longest City Walk as a two-hour round trip with her boyfriend, walking and chatting from school when she was in a low state of mind. It is worth mentioning that when it comes to the relationship, she describes herself as a person who is fond of planning walks, but her boyfriend was not active in this matter. She confesses, "When I found that it was always me unilaterally dragging him out for a walk, I realised that maybe the relationship wasn't going to last long either."

Participants are sometimes more daring explorers than they think they are. **Zhongyao** describes herself as an introvert and timid about reaching out to new things. "I might find a good restaurant near the campus and then frequent only that one." In her opinion, most city walkers have high social energy and are always willing to explore new spaces, which is the opposite of hers. The truth is, however, introversion and the trait of quickly feeling tired did not affect her enthusiasm for wandering the streets. She usually goes out on the streets alone or with one or two regular friends with the help of navigation to get a general direction, and her walking range could reach up to ten kilometres.

The narratives of these female city walkers show that they, like flaneuse, are discovering more about themselves through their walks, experiencing growth and renewal while expanding the

boundaries of spatial exploration. Their motivations for walking vary, ranging from the need for physical and mental pleasure to a response to the rules and restrictions imposed by society. They are not only rebelling against the expectation that women must be in the private sphere, but they are also unwilling to be submissively confined to their offices and schools under the intense pressure of work. Their growth also speaks of women's bravery and independence.

2. Observation and narrative

Elkin (2017) argues that the stories and representations of female urban wanderers differ significantly from their male counterparts, both in literature and lived experiences. The flâneuse's perspective offers alternative narratives that challenge dominant urban narratives shaped by male perspectives. In this section, I will present what city walkers specifically experience and observe in City Walk. Their wanderings and observations reveal the city's overlooked spaces, people, and stories that are often marginalised or rendered invisible.

To begin with, there is a randomness to the landscapes and things that attract city walkers, just as aimless wandering and encountering the city make up flâneuse's behaviour. Although there are times when city walkers travel towards a definite destination, they stop on the way for a nice view, admiring the rays of sunlight shining on the roofs of the houses along the street, or they will change direction temporarily at a particular crossroads and head towards the road with tall trees planted alongside. I asked participants to arrange a City Walk from campus based on their walking habits, and as a result, six out of ten participants had no pre-designed walking routes or places they explicitly wanted to pass by. The remaining four participants arranged the places they wanted to pass by, but in the actual walk, they did not strictly follow a certain route, and their walks showed a sense of spontaneous improvisation. **Xiange** and **Pan** had arranged a visit to an art gallery during our go-along interviews. We walked to the gallery and realised it was already closing time. The participants did not care much about it, and we wandered as we pleased. Each participant described the spatial characteristics they were interested in: **Xiange** likes narrow roads; **Zhongyao** likes wide streets planted with trees; **Pan** likes open and lively spaces; and **Lei** likes the campus at night. Where to stop by and which direction to choose at a crossroads reflect their taste of beauty on the streets. **Zhongyao** went down a fork because "just a few seconds ago when we were waiting at the traffic light, I saw the sunlight pouring through the gaps in the trees on this fork. It was so beautiful that I decided to go this way (P2.1)."

P2.1 Sunlight on the street, photo by me with Zhongyao   *P2.2 Extra old houses, photo by me with Xiange*

Experiencing beauty in the city could be so unexpected that **Jia** described herself as not being much of an outdoorsy person, but she shared this story:

"I ran to a quaint historical community. It was close to midnight. As I watched the lights go out one by one on the street, it felt like the whole world had fallen silent. This was a Nanjing I had never experienced before." (**P7 - Jia**)

Walking permits the walker to stop at any time and pay careful attention to what is in the corners of the space that can be easily overlooked. **Xiange** stepped up the stairs of a street-facing building in order to capture the afternoon sunlight falling on the leaves of the trees high above. Usually, she actively seeks out unique perspectives to present these interesting scenes that she encounters from time to time, and her walks are often stop-and-go. She is very good at spotting unique monoliths in street architecture, such as extra old houses (P2.2). **Tang** takes photos to document the lovely things she sees along the way, and during the interview, she takes a shoot of a giant rubber duck floating on the lake in the city park. **Coco** feels that the streetscapes look fascinating from certain observing angles, presenting a unique light and shadow effect. She believes that walking is very rewarding in terms of discovering the beauties scattered in the urban space.

"Experiencing the city with different modes of transport is completely different. People who drive are definitely not exposed to the world enough compared to people who walk. For example, I can spot a stall selling goldfish on a street corner, can a person driving see it?" (**P5 - Coco**)

P2.3 Lovely giant duck, photo by me with Tang
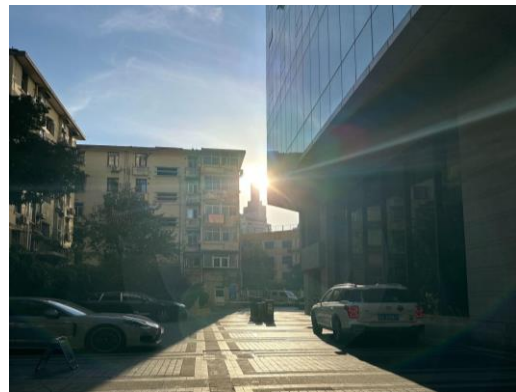
P2.4 Light and shadow, photo by me with Coco

Participants are guided to describe their discoveries and anecdotes in some specific spaces, especially the part of it that appeals to them. **Lu** likes to browse stores next to old residential buildings in narrow alleys. She speaks excitedly about her experience of exploring stores; the more local stores that older residents frequented, the more likely they were to offer better products and services. Through her observations, she found wonderful delis and massage parlours near the campus. **Xiange** likes cafes that have an artistic and unique atmosphere. She was impressed by other users on *Xiaohongshu* sharing an LGBT-friendly cafe nearby and decided to take a visit. "The store was on higher ground with many steps in front of the entrance, and customers just sat on the steps enjoying their drinks and chatting. The vibe fascinated me." **Pan** likes a second-hand bookstore that opens on a narrow street; the owner keeps chickens and ducks in the yard in front of the store, which creates a sense of life. **Zhongyao** likes streets with sweet stores and flower stores. "I don't necessarily go to these stores to consume. But florists and dessert stores tend to have nice windows and you can observe great street looks when you pass by." **Jia** would explore the various cafes around campus, not only for her love of coffee but also to discover stores with different design styles. During my walk with her, I also experienced a short coffee chat

while sitting on a short stool outside (P2.5). **Zhu**'s description pretty much sums up other city walkers' impressions of the urban environment around the NJU campus:

> "There are two styles of urban images. One is commonplace, close to the residents, less refined but convenient for daily life; the other is refined, high-consumption, rich in art and design, appealing to young people." Most interestingly, on our walk she discovered two styles partitioned by a wall: a coffee shop with a more elaborate storefront, with a regular noodle shop next door to it (P2.6)." (**P9 - Zhu**)

P2.5 A coffee chat, photo by me with Jia

P2.6 Two styles, photo by me with Zhu

On the other hand, the city also has its unpleasant or repellent side. The details provided by the participants often present a distinctly female perspective. **Lu** usually stays away from the bar street. She keeps vigilant even just passing by these areas, feeling that there are a lot of unsafe factors. **Xiange** was once accosted by a stranger while walking through a well-known bar street in Nanjing. The strange man asked her if she was alone and if she wanted a drink. She felt dangerous and quickly moved away. **Pan** likes places that are still bright at night, but most areas around the school are gloomy, creating a sense of insecurity. Despite her preference to stay out until slightly later in the evening, she still had to make it back to her place in time. **Pan** also describes how she has been stared at and observed by middle-aged or even older males on the street while wearing slightly more revealing garments (with her arms and a small amount of her rocker exposed). This made her feel very uncomfortable and after such an experience, she would dress more conservatively when she went out on the streets of Nanjing again. **Zhongyao** shares her unpleasant experiences:

> "Once two friends and I were walking on the street in Nanjing when suddenly a strange man approached, touched my friend on the shoulder and said be careful. We were all very confused because we were just walking normally. This could have been just a small incident, but it led to my friend not wanting to settle in Nanjing in the future." (**P4 - Zhongyao**)

In fact, negative features in urban space are not attached to one particular city. Participants also had experiences of walking in other cities that left unpleasant memories. **Zhu** said that she wouldn't travel to Wuhan again. In addition to not being used to the climate, she encountered many topless men on the streets which left her with a bad impression of the city. **Lei** once lived in the suburbs of Shanghai for a while. The spacious streets and speeding electric bikes everywhere did not create the intimacy and sense of security that the downtown of Shanghai can offer.

It is also worth mentioning that four of the ten participants(**P2 - Xiange, P4 - Zhongyao, P5 - Coco, P9 - Zhu**) are students at Nanjing University's School of Architecture and Urban Planning, which

means that their perception of space can be professional. They walk in the city while participating in the study and practice of urban construction. Their more profound understanding of urban space and their professional habits, including observing the organisation of the space in terms of forms and scales and the public use of the space influence their travelling. **Zhu** noticed that a new exhibition for drainage facilities had been built in a neighbourhood near the campus, so she included the visit in the go-along interview route and we enjoyed this historic and knowledgeable visit. **Zhongyao** described that field trips to certain urban venues led by her course teacher impressed her most. She gained an in-depth understanding of several historical buildings in Nanjing and observed the environment near the metro station in a remote part of the city. They keenly observe the changes in urban space and the relationship between space and people. **Coco** would actively record her perception of the urban space, including the feelings of sound and visual experiences; **Xiange** would pay attention to the design of some facilities in the public area, for example, whether the chairs in the residential neighbourhoods with a history in the old districts would be waterlogged or not, and whether the materials were chosen appropriately (P2.7, P2.8). Observing how residents use public space also feeds her professional learning and thinking.

"The newly built facilities in some old communities do not match the needs of the residents. Are the huge changes in urban renewal sessions worth it? Do they provide convenience to everyone? However, many necessary pre-planning dialogues with residents were omitted during the pandemic. Designers closed their doors and made programmes without stepping outside to see in person what was going on in actual space." (**P2 - Xiange**)

P2.7 Public leisure space, photo by me with Xiange

P2.8 Public chairs, photo by me with Xiange

As both city walkers and urban experts, they see the beauty of the city as inseparable from thoughtful planning and layout and a favourable human experience in public space. Their presence also reveals that women who wander the streets are not all immersed in leisure or engaged in various types of consumption and entertainment (Scraton & Watson, 1998), but that their perceptions of the city are of a working, academic and even critical nature.

The examples Elkin mentions, from George Sand's novels (Elkin, 2017) to the sculptures of the Expressionist artist Vally Wieselthie (Elkin, 2017), seem to suggest that flâneuse were to be found in displayed literary and artistic creations, and flâneuse are the creators themselves. The young city walkers in this study are not famous artists or novelists, nor are they recorded or described by artists or novelists. To convey one's experiences and observations is not necessarily the main purpose of their walk. Among the students I recruited, some are engaged in the study and practice of urban planning and architectural design; some display their photos on social media platforms during their City Walk; and some merely enjoy walking and feeling every corner of the space that attracts or repels her. Nevertheless, the narratives and observations left by their active participation in this study are of great significance.

3. Visibility and Invisibility

Elkin (2017) highlights the paradoxical state of being visible yet invisible that flâneuse often experiences in cities. While their presence in public spaces is noticeable, they are simultaneously rendered invisible by societal norms and power structures that have historically excluded women from freely occupying urban environments. The flâneuse must navigate this duality, sometimes embracing anonymity and other times asserting her right to be seen and heard. In this section, I will emphasise the changes in the visibility and invisibility of women in the social media-driven City Walk. Drawing on the attitudes and observations of the participants, I attempt to explain the social norms that have caused these changes and their impacts.

Unlike in the past when women were confined to the private sphere, it is now common for women to go into the public space, and are even encouraged to do so, especially in the light of social media. **Pan** summarises, "City Walk encourages me to seek out ways of being outdoors that are uniquely my own." Social media influencers inspire **Lu** and make her realise that one should not confine herself to the campus, but rather go out to the streets to learn more about the culture and customs of the society and residents. The popularity of City Walk on social media also makes the city more crowded, with females seemingly occupying public space everywhere. **Xiange**, **Coco**, and **Zhu** all observed that "Nanjing seems to have become very popular all of a sudden" in the post-COVID era and the City Walk trend. When **Coco** and I were walking along a historic street, we saw a large number of female city walkers gathering on the sidewalks (P3.1 & P3.2). **Coco** was surprised to say, "This street is so unexpectedly crowded. Before the pandemic, it was just a retro-styled city commuter strip, not so crowded." **Lei** found that after City Walk became popular, female students around her tended to describe places in the city directly by the names of the locations. Whereas before her friends' impressions of urban spaces centred more on the character of the space and rough directions, they now know exactly "what stores are on which streets." She speculates that "it turns out that social media pushes beautiful photos along with the place names of the locations," making a quick connection between spatial impressions and specific locations.

P3.1 & 3.2 The historic street with many women, photo by me with Coco

Social media greatly encourages female users to create and publish content. Some participants also share their walking experiences and photos on the Internet. **Xiange** and **Pan** would post interesting images of the city they had captured on *WeChat* and *QQ*[3] to document a particular trip. **Coco** chooses

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[3] *Wechat* and *QQ* are both mainstream social messaging apps in China that also have status and location sharing functions.

to post unique photos taken during her walks on *Weibo*[4] with poetic phrases. She describes these as "stream-of-consciousness stuff". She doesn't tend to share explicit information, such as "I went somewhere with someone today". She sees her posts as a form of self-revelation, and she does not expect other users to understand. Generally, most participants view social media messages regularly, and it was clear that women are the dominant content posters in the City Walk topic on social media.

According to what participants' have observed, selfies and portraits are the forms of documentation that the city walkers significantly presented on social media. Influencers on social media rave about specific locations and accompany them with beautiful photos to increase the exposure of their content. This has led to many female city walkers fully engaging in taking photos in the offline space. Wandering with **Coco** through the historical street in Nanjing, we witnessed a series of people immersed in photography: they stood still or paced back and forth, looking for perfect scenes with beautiful light to make up a wonderful photo background. For the best shoot, many people held balloons, flowers and other props in their hands, and some even dressed up in elaborate clothing (P3.1 & P3.2). While we quietly observed them, passing through the mass of people who stayed in place, no one paid any attention to us. It is worth noting that these female city walkers walk in pairs or groups. We saw female friends helping each other, taking turns to take pictures of each other; more specifically, women with men often stood in front of the camera while the men carried the camera and took pictures for them. Being focused on photography, they stop somewhere for a long time instead of always walking (P3.3 & 3.4). This has led to many city walkers posting on social media seeking walking partners. **Lu** once looked for walking partners on *Xiaohongshu*, and she found that many women post to find a partner who can help take photos during their walks, and some people even pay for that. **Lei** realises that in the past two years, most of her female friends have become fond of taking photos, leaving a set of photos every time they hang out together.

P3.3 & 3.4 People stopped on the street, photo by me with Coco

Some participants showed significant negative attitudes towards these phenomena. Social media has greatly contributed to the exposure and visibility of female city walkers, but has solidified the role of women as viewed objects and has forced women to be more conscious of their appearance in both online and offline spaces. Women face more scrutiny and rules when entering public spaces, causing some women to choose to hide themselves. Selfies or portraits were relatively rare among the participants' photographic behaviour. As mentioned above, some participants would share the photos they took online. These pictures are mainly of the architecture, scenery and other things, and less often the photos of themselves.

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[4] *Weibo* is a social media site that provides micro-blogging. It has been described as Chinese version of Twitter. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weibo

Pan comments that she hates *Xiaohongshu* and the City Walk it portrayed.

"Female users on *Xiaohongshu* share City Walk photos and vlogs, and almost everyone wears elaborate makeup, has a nice hairstyle, wears a nice outfit, and then goes to internet-famous stores with friends. This is the first impression of City Walk brought to me by *Xiaohongshu*. Later on, I started City Walk on my own and realised that it could be a part of my own daily life practice. City Walk can be very simple." (**P3 - Pan**)

Lu sometimes looks for a female walking partner on *Xiaohongshu* for the expectation of a deep conversation during the walk instead of a partner who just wants to go to popular places and be obsessed with taking pictures. However, it is clear that the vast majority of female City Walk partners that can be found on social media are the latter. She was impressed after witnessing well-dressed city walkers on the streets devoting themselves to photography: "They work hard just for one picture to increase the number of likes for one of their short videos. Do these city walkers really enjoy walking in the city?" **Coco** describes the city walkers who are engaged in photography and posting as "they are creating an almost hallucinatory atmosphere of they are immersed in the life at the moment." She argues that there is nothing innovative about the exposure. There is also nothing groundbreaking about the female city walkers becoming visible on the internet because they are following the rules that social media has set for them: create around the topic of City Walk and then get exposure and clicks to drive attention to themselves and their platforms.

"Taking photos is a superficial expression, and its threshold is not too high. However, the real life of travelling is not always with a camera and is worth posting. That's why I said these people are creating the illusion of life. Now city walkers put these behaviours on display. You'll find that what they post on social media is just performances, and they perform the same play over and over again. No one is actually creating something new." (**P5 - Coco**)

Exploring the social media operations may reveal the rationale behind the visibility of female city walkers. Indeed, the popularity of City Walk has sparked a debate as to whether this is a deliberate marketing strategy developed by city managers, digital curators and speculators. According to **Coco**'s knowledge, social media is constantly launching topics and checking the public reaction. If users react quickly with rich content to a certain topic, the platforms push and direct users to share more about the topic. Such strategies make City Walk go viral, together with specific urban places such as streets, squares, restaurants or even a particular ornately decorated public toilet that become familiar and flocked destinations. The platform pushes female city walkers' posts to more people, thus accumulating the value of users' accounts while fuelling tourism marketing for the particular place or even the city.

The visibility of information which is intentionally guided influences everyone's perception of the city and travelling activities. As a result, the real attractiveness of the places is questionable, and users' travelling experience offline may not be as good as expected. Participants shared their experiences of being misled by posts online. **Xiange** encountered restaurants posting pictures of dishes on digital platforms that looked sophisticated and tasty while dining at the restaurant was not as satisfying as it should have been. **Tang** clearly expressed her attitude about the fraudulent nature of information on social media.

"More than once, I have been deceived by photos posted by other users. I took the metro and then walked to a certain tourist attraction, and realised that it was actually very boring. But the netizens posed beautifully in the tourist photos and processed the photos to make them look very pleasing, but far from the actual look of the scene. " (**P8 - Tang**)

Some participants join in city walks, yet they refuse to be scrutinised by others or easily defined as trend followers. In fact, despite their invisibility in the trend, they still emphasise their presence in City Walk. They advocate that everyone walks in the city in a spontaneous, personalised and free way. **Coco** and **Zhu** have been browsing posts on *Xiaohongshu* that summarise City Walk routes with specific themes, such as a series of good photography sites or a historical trip throughout the city. **Jia** believes these route recommendation posts are templated and will unconsciously influence other users to walk strictly according to the route. Streetwalking, which should be a spontaneous activity, becomes like completing a task. **Tang** learns a lesson that people have to rely on their own eyes, not on someone else's, to understand what a space really looks like. As **Xiange** commented,

> "I don't like route recommendations. Why must I follow a route that someone else thinks is great? I enjoy running into places on my own, instead of having a preconceived impression of every place before I go outside. Some route plans are written in too much detail, and I lost the freshness of exploring the city after reading the posts." (**P2 - Xiange**)

Generally, each participant expressed a sense of commitment and enjoyment of City Walks as an activity. They have lived a life of wandering the streets from time to time even before the phrase City Walk became popular on social media. **Zhu** argues that the capital and media marketing behind popular phenomena affect the same people who are always susceptible to trends. **Wen** believes that it is meaningful for residents to learn more about the city they live in through City Walk. In the long run, even though many city walkers are keen to follow the trend and take photos mainly, more of the beautiful scenes in the city are discovered in this process. "The interesting places in a city are the places where people approach when they wander," says **Coco**, "A City Walk is a spontaneous and free activity that can take place anywhere in the city, and the experience is sensual and individual. "

One of the reasons why flâneuse can enjoy wandering so much lie in the fact that they are immersed in the life and leisure they have chosen for themselves. In contemporary China, social media encourages women to express themselves and enter the public space, while at the same time setting expectations for women in terms of their appearance and behaviour, and making them part of the platform's commercial operations. While flâneuse from 2023 refuses to cater to the expectations and rules created by social media for every city walker. They are never bothered to show off their beautiful photographs or be part of a trend, they just step outside as they please in their free time.

Conclusion and Discussion: The flâneuse in 2023

To gain insights into the walking behaviours and experiences of young Chinese women in 2023, this study conducts go-along interviews with female university students living in Nanjing University's Gulou Campus to understand how they participate in the City Walk. Based on the results, we can conclude that female city walkers' motivations, behaviours, and experiences have the following characteristics. First, their motivations for participating in City Walk involve resistance to social restrictions on the scope of activities; through walking, they expand the boundaries of urban spatial exploration. Second, their observations and narratives about walking reflect women's distinctive perspectives, focusing on features and things that can be easily overlooked and marginalised in the city. These characteristics make female city walkers similar to flâneuse in Feminist Geography.

Walking behaviours and experiences of young women in China also inject new representations and connotations into the concept of flâneuse. In the context of City Walk, social media has fueled a change in the rules for women's access to urban public space and self-presentation. Women have long been excluded or restricted from the public sphere by patriarchal societies, and have not been documented in the literature and narratives of modernity (Wolff, 1985). However, in the year 2023 in China, women may have been encouraged to appear in the public sphere in a glamorous and independent manner. Social media expects every female city walker to post more content and interact with others, which contributes to the large number of female city walkers present both online and offline. By displaying their beauty and catering to the push mechanism of social media platforms, female city walkers can gain more exposure and become more "visible". Their publicity has also led to the popularisation of specific places. Social media has also led to a greater number of people following established routes and congregating at popular places, dissolving the spontaneity and randomness of City Walk. Interestingly, some of the participants in this study avoided appearing on social media platforms and others avoided places that were too popular. The invisibility of flâneuse, as described by Elkin (2017), lies in the fact that patriarchal norms and power structures have historically excluded women from freely occupying urban environments. The invisibility of the participants in this study lies in the fact that they do not cater to social media trends and the norms they create. However, just as flâneuse simultaneously asserts her right to be seen and heard, the participants affirm the social significance of City Walk and push for a personalised and free walk.

1. Research's preconception

Elkin (2017) explains flâneuse as their behaviour of leisurely wandering and observing the city, claiming public space, and finding their own voice. I initially defined each of the women who joined the Chinese City Walk trend as a female wanderer or flâneuse. In fact, however, none of the participants in this study were aware of the concept of flâneuse, nor did they ever define themselves as flâneuse. Especially when I described to the participants that flâneuse challenges the established gender norms of the space, they questioned whether they were able to have such a great impact. Even so, after researching and analysing the data, I believe that their lifestyle of walking and observing casually reflects that they do belong to the flâneuse; however, in China in 2023, these flâneuses have neither become mavericks in the urban public space, nor have they made an impact on, or been documented in, literary narratives or artistic creations. Instead, the uniqueness I have observed is that they stand in stark contrast to a significant proportion of city walkers:

1) Many city walkers began to take the plunge into wanderlust after the phrase City Walk became popular, while the participants in this study considered themselves wanderers long before City Walk became popular;

2) Many city walkers carefully plan their travelling. However, participants in this study travelled relatively more spontaneously.

3) Many city walkers are committed to taking beautiful photos of themselves on their trips, putting in a lot of effort to do so and seeking to better expose themselves on social media. However, this was not what the participants in this study were looking for and doing.

I become more reflective of my own preconceptions that all the women who joined the City Walk trend were flâneuse. In particular, I began to wonder if this segment of city walkers who follow trends and are keen to present themselves also belong to the category of flâneuse. They are highly susceptible to placing themselves in the position of the observed rather than the observer when they are concerned with their image in the minds of others. Their commitment to creating and presenting themselves under the topic of City Walk left several of this study's participants with the impression that 'City walk is a complex and templated activity, and everyone joining in is particularly focused on the outward appearance of themselves.' In this context, the participants in this study either actively or unconsciously made themselves invisible. In my opinion, it is a form of rebellion against the public demand for women to present themselves in a favourable light. However, the result of the flâneuse hiding themselves also resulted in their voices being heard by a few. On the other hand, the female city walkers who are willing to expose themselves and share their experiences are also using their influence to show that it is no longer a rare phenomenon for women to enter the urban public space.

2. Reflection and Extension

The discipline's longstanding neglect of women's exclusion or limited access to the public sphere is a central feature of the history of geographical thought (McDowell, 1999, p.156). I think that in modern times, women may have been encouraged to take on a polished image in the public sphere. But these changes have not really been reversed from the neglect that female wanderers still suffer from being ostracised or asked to display traits allowed in a patriarchal society. The most important point of this study is to give more people a chance to see the invisible flâneuse and what they see and feel in the urban space.

The most notable flaw in this study may be the bias in recruitment, as the results show that there is a difference between female city walkers who are open to self-exposure and those who are relatively invisible. However, the participants I recruited were almost exclusively the latter. This leads to a critical view of city walks as a social media trend in this study. Furthermore, without direct access to city walkers who are willing to self-expose on social media, the analysis of this group is derived from participant observation and thus may be biased. In addition, due to the snowballing method, four of the ten participants I recruited were from the School of Architecture and Urban Planning. The information they gave enriched the chapter on feminised urban aesthetics, but may also have biased the findings by creating stereotypes of female wanderer identities tied to urban-related professionals. It is worth noting that the research recruitment advert states that this study is open to females only, attracting female

participants to volunteer for the research. During the course of the interviews, I further discovered that the vast majority of them were exposed to feminist thought to a greater or lesser extent, thus contributing to their more critical and anti-mainstream thinking perspectives.

The second point of reflection is that it was only after the empirical work was completed that I realised that social media and information sharing may have played a far more influential role in the dynamics of urban space and the phenomenon of city walk than I had anticipated. However, the initial conceptualisation did not include social media as a main point. I also neglect collecting data on social media platforms during the empirical work. Most descriptions and reflections about social media come from participants rather than the researcher's first-hand data, which is the part I regret and aspire to work on further.

Last but not least, this study gathered many of the participants' explorations of specific spaces, streets, and places. Due to article length limitations, this paper did not focus on this section, which is also regrettable. It would have been interesting to visualise the trajectories and extent of the participants' urban explorations and present their evaluations and experiences of different zones and neighbourhoods on a map as part of the results.

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