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The Everyday Life of Security: Capturing Space, Practice, and Affect

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Security shapes everyday life, but despite a growing literature on everyday security there is no consensus on the meaning of the “everyday.” At the same time, the research methods that dominate the field are designed to study elites and high politics. This paper does two things. First, it brings together and synthesizes the existing literature on everyday security to argue that we should think about the everyday life of security as constituted across three dimensions: space, practice, and affect. Thus, the paper adds conceptual clarity, demonstrating that the everyday life of security is multifaceted and exists in mundane spaces, routine practices, and affective/lived experiences. Second, it works through the methodological implications of a three-dimensional understanding of everyday security. In order to capture all three dimensions and the ways in which they interact, we need to explore different methods. The paper offers one such method, exploring the everyday life of security in contemporary China through a participatory photography project with six ordinary citizens in Beijing. The central contribution of the paper is capturing—conceptually and methodologically—all three dimensions, in order to develop our understanding of the everyday life of security.

La sécurité façonne la vie quotidienne, mais bien qu’une littérature croissante porte sur la sécurité quotidienne, il n’y a aucun consensus sur la signification de « quotidien ». Dans le même temps, les méthodes de recherche qui dominent le domaine sont conçues pour étudier les élites et la haute politique. Cet article mène deux activités. D’abord, il réunit et synthétise la littérature existante sur la sécurité quotidienne pour soutenir que nous devrions envisager la vie quotidienne de la sécurité comme étant constituée de trois dimensions: l’espace, la pratique et l’affect. Ainsi, cet article apporte de la clarté conceptuelle en démontrant que la vie quotidienne de la sécurité a de multiples facettes et qu’elle est présente dans les espaces banaux, les pratiques routinières et les expériences affectives/vécues. Puis, il étudie les implications méthodologiques d’une compréhension tridimensionnelle de la sécurité quotidienne. Nous devons explorer différentes méthodes afin de saisir l’ensemble des trois dimensions et les manières dont elles interagissent. Cet article propose l’une de ces méthodes en explorant la vie quotidienne de la sécurité dans la Chine moderne par le biais d’un projet de photographie participatif portant sur six citoyens ordinaires de Pékin. La principale contribution de cet article est qu’il s’empare—conceptuellement et méthodologiquement—de l’ensemble des trois dimensions afin de développer notre compréhension de la vie quotidienne de la sécurité.

La seguridad da forma a la vida cotidiana; sin embargo, a pesar de la creciente literatura sobre la seguridad cotidiana, no hay consenso sobre el significado de “lo cotidiano.” Al mismo tiempo, los métodos de

investigación que dominan el campo están diseñados para estudiar las élites y la alta política. Este trabajo se ocupa de dos aspectos. En primer lugar, reúne y sintetiza la literatura existente sobre la seguridad cotidiana para sostener que debemos pensar en la vida cotidiana de la seguridad como constituida a través de tres dimensiones: espacio, práctica y afecto. De este modo, para añadir claridad conceptual, el trabajo demuestra que la vida cotidiana de la seguridad es multifacética y existe en los espacios mundanos, las prácticas rutinarias y las experiencias afectivas/vivenciales. En segundo lugar, recorre las implicaciones metodológicas de una concepción tridimensional de la seguridad cotidiana. Para poder reflejar las tres dimensiones y las formas en que interactúan, necesitamos explorar diferentes métodos. El trabajo ofrece uno de esos métodos explorando la vida cotidiana de la seguridad en la China contemporánea a través de un proyecto fotográfico participativo con seis ciudadanos comunes en Pekín. La contribución central del trabajo es reflejar las tres dimensiones de manera conceptual y metodológica, para desarrollar nuestra concepción de la vida cotidiana de la seguridad.

Everywhere you go, there's tons of security, like all public places, there are tons of security [personnel]. So physically safe, yes, I feel really secured, but I also don't *feel* that secure.

—Daxian, Beijing, 2018

Security shapes everyday life. It filters down into mundane spaces, where it is made and remade in routine practices and feelings, shaping the lived experience and lifeworlds of ordinary people. Feminist scholars have demonstrated the importance of understanding the everyday as a site of politics. International politics shapes everyday life and, at the same time, “the everyday is constitutive of global politics” (Åhäll 2019, 151). But we have struggled to capture the everyday life of security. Despite a growing literature, there is no consensus over the meaning of the “everyday” in studies on everyday security (Jarvis 2019). Different literatures have developed separately while speaking to different audiences, and talk at cross-purposes. At the same time, scholars have struggled to find suitable methods for studying the everyday life of security. The traditional research methods that dominate the field are designed to study elites and high politics (Stanley and Jackson 2016). In response, recent work has deployed focus groups, ethnographic methods, discourse and visual analysis, and creative methods like film. These methods speak well to their intended audience, but rarely cut across different understandings of the everyday. There has been little attempt to synthesize approaches to the everyday. Bringing them together would deepen our understanding of the everyday life of security, but in order to do that we need both conceptual development and methodological advances. Consequently, this paper asks: how can we cut across and capture these different aspects of the everyday life of security?

The paper develops a conceptual framework and offers a method for doing that. It does so in two moves. First, it brings together and synthesizes the existing literature to argue that the everyday life of security has three dimensions: space, practice, and affect, building on Crawford and Hutchinson (2016, 1185–86). Thus, the paper adds conceptual clarity, demonstrating that the everyday life of security is multifaceted and exists in mundane spaces, routine practices, and affective/lived experiences. Second, it works through the methodological implications. In order to capture all three dimensions and the ways in which they interact, we need to consider new methods. The paper offers one such method, exploring the everyday life of security in contemporary China through a participatory photography

project with six ordinary citizens in Beijing.¹ My participants each took a series of photographs to represent their interactions with, experiences of, and feelings about security in daily life, which were then discussed in in-depth interviews, creating a unique dataset and a “counter-archive” of knowledge about contemporary in/security (Shapiro 2013, 85; see also Vaughan-Williams and Stevens 2016, 3). International relations (IR) and security studies have experienced a “visual turn” (Bleiker 2018a), but despite a growing body of work on visuality, the use of visual methods remains uncommon (Vuori and Andersen 2018, 13). While this is just one method and as such only a beginning, it can cut across and draw out all three dimensions of the everyday life of security.

The central contribution of this paper is capturing—conceptually *and* methodologically—all three dimensions, in order to develop our understanding of the everyday life of security. The paper presents a novel categorization of the everyday, demonstrating that the everyday has three dimensions. By bringing together and synthesizing the existing literature, it develops a three-dimensional conceptual framework that better captures the different aspects of the everyday. The paper then demonstrates how this conceptual framework can unravel the everyday in a different and exciting way. It does this by deploying an unconventional method in the field of IR, unpacking and organizing the data using the three dimensions developed in the conceptual framework. Understanding how security manifests itself in everyday life is key for understanding what security actually is. Consequently, bringing these three dimensions together is key for theorizing security.

The article proceeds in three sections. It begins by introducing the conceptual framework, building on the existing literature to draw out and demonstrate that the everyday has spatial, temporal, and affective dimensions. It then offers a method to capture these dimensions, briefly setting out my use of participatory photography and then presenting four “snapshots,” each of which combines stories and photographs from my participants, drawing out the spatial, temporal, and affective dimensions of the everyday life of security.

Conceptualizing the Everyday: Space, Practice, and Affect

There is growing interest in the everyday life of security, with multiple, overlapping literatures. From feminist studies of security to post- or decolonial research, from practice theory to ontological security studies or the vernacular turn, these different literatures have developed from different starting points and speak to different audiences. As a result, each has its own understanding of the everyday and where to find it. The theoretical roots of these literatures have already been reviewed (Jarvis 2019). Instead, my aim here is to develop a conceptual framework that captures these different contributions, bringing them together. To conceptualize the everyday, I develop and systematize Crawford and Hutchinson’s (2016) dimensions of everyday security. They analyze individual experiences of security governance, which they suggest have “temporal, spatial, and emotional features” (Crawford and Hutchinson 2016, 1185–86). Here, I start from a broader understanding of everyday security: I want to understand how security is (re)produced in the everyday, speaking to critical security studies broadly conceived.² Consequently, I build on their three dimensions of everyday security to refine and expand them to speak to this broader understanding of security. In the process, I draw together and synthesize these dimensions with the broader interdisciplinary literature, in order to develop a conceptual framework that captures these different aspects of the everyday life

¹ This research is part of a larger project for which I have undertaken extensive fieldwork in China, traveling widely and exploring security politics through a range of research methods during embedded ethnographic fieldwork.

² Crawford and Hutchinson start from a narrower conceptual foundation, defining everyday security as centered on the “lived experiences of individuals and groups” (Crawford and Hutchinson 2016, 1190). Situated in criminology, they use this to improve understanding of formal security governance.

of security. By capturing all three dimensions, we gain a clearer, deeper, and more comprehensive understanding of the everyday life of security. In turn, I hope that drawing key approaches together to show how they relate to each other and speak to a bigger whole may encourage more engagement and productive conversations between different schools of thought on everyday security, building bridges and spurring further conceptual advancement.

First, we need to consider the underlying question of what the “everyday” actually is. What makes something “everyday”? The term itself is rarely defined and authors often move between related terms as if they are simply synonymous. From everyday to ordinary, mundane, vernacular, prosaic, or banal, the “everyday” is evoked in a wide range of contexts to signify quite different things. Everyday life *is* messy and hard to pin down. For Lefebvre, the everyday evades definition partly because opacity is central to the meaning itself.³ In his reading, everyday life is the residual, the residue, “‘what is left over’ after all distinct, superior, specialised, structured activities have been singled out” (Lefebvre 1947a/1991, 97 in [Seigworth and Gardiner 2004](#), 147). Davies draws on Lefebvre to critique the turn to the everyday in international political economy, suggesting that the notion of “everyday life” has remained “un- or undertheorized.” In response, he argues that we need a theoretically informed account that actually grapples with “the everyday *character* of everyday life: everyday life as rhythms, repetitions, habits; banal, mundane, unreflected upon” ([Davies 2016](#), 28). Here, the everyday has two key characteristics: temporal (happens day-to-day, repeatedly, habitually) and unthinking (unstructured, unplanned, indistinct, unreflected upon).

While authors rarely define the term everyday, an interest in *ordinariness* runs through much of the literature on the everyday life of security. There is an emphasis on non-importance, what [Enloe \(2011, 447\)](#) refers to as the “pre-political.” This adds a slightly different focus to these debates that distinguishes them from social theories of everyday life, where everyday life can have largely temporal connotations, referring to routines, rhythms, and practices that occur unthinkingly day to day. Ordinariness can also refer to practices, places, people, or experiences that are common, and therefore seem to be *unimportant* or indeed non-political. Here, the term “everyday” says something about power, about where power lies and where it doesn’t. For some scholars, this links the everyday with “ordinary people” or “non-elite knowledge” ([Vaughan-Williams and Stevens 2016](#); [Stump 2017](#); [Eschle 2018](#)). At other times, there is a concern with what happens in ordinary spaces, as opposed to what we might conventionally see as spaces of power or politics.

Scholarship on the everyday life of security shares a desire to take what we assume to be ordinary, non-important, and pre-political, and to demonstrate that it is in fact *political*: whether it be ordinary spaces, routine practices and habits, or lived experiences. The motivation underpinning much of this work is to make visible, to make political, the practices, places, and experiences that the field has ignored in its focus on the “international.” At the same time, as Davies notes, the result is often a reification of the everyday as *separate from* the international. In IR, “the everyday” is often used to refer to what happens “on the ground” as opposed to in the abstract “international.” However, they are not separate realms, they are co-constituted (see [Davies 2016](#), 24). Crucially, naming “the everyday” has effects: it is a political move that changes political analysis, disrupting “elite focused sociologies,” while also politicizing more “practices, subjects, relations, things”: as a result, “political life becomes abundant” ([Guillaume and Huysmans 2019](#), 285). But rather than simply reversing our interest from macro- to micro-levels, the “everyday” disturbs the very foundation of that distinction, and requires a move toward a more horizontal understanding of relations, recognizing that concepts like security “only exist as they are enacted in daily practices, relations and

³ Similarly, for Blanchot, “the everyday escapes: that is its definition” (translated in [Sheringham 2006](#), 16).

entanglements” (Guillaume and Huysmans 2019, 283), or, I would add, in mundane spaces, or affective and embodied experiences. Read in this way, the “everyday” fundamentally decenters how we think about politics and political relevance (Guillaume and Huysmans 2019, 281).

With this in mind, I define the everyday as residing in three dimensions: *mundane spaces* (the spatial everyday), *routine practices* (the temporal everyday), and *lived experiences* (the affective everyday). These three dimensions encompass the vast majority of the broader literature on everyday security, where scholars focus in different ways on aspects of these dimensions. Some focus on everyday spaces, examining what happens in mundane locations: from public parks to train stations, to airports, or borders. Other scholars analyze routine security practices, whether by diplomats, security professionals, ordinary people, technologies, or objects. Lastly, some scholars focus on lived experiences of security, studying how security is felt, experienced, or made on the ground. Many scholars focus primarily on one dimension, while some combine or blur dimensions. I argue that each of these three dimensions makes a significant contribution, but that bringing them together more fully captures the everyday life of security, demonstrating that it is multifaceted and that each dimension speaks to a bigger whole. The rest of this section applies this to the existing literature on everyday security to demonstrate and develop these three dimensions and the synergies between them. I have focused primarily on work that explicitly uses the concept of the everyday in the context of security.

Space

The first dimension approaches the everyday through a spatial lens, emphasizing mundane locations. Here, space is what defines “everyday,” usually referring to spaces outside of formal politics. Scholars often focus on locations that are ordinary and accessible to all, analyzing what happens in spaces of (perceived) non-importance or non-power. In some cases, there is also a focus on ordinary people, as the people who inhabit these spaces. Overall, scholars demonstrate that “mundane territories” matter for IR (Acuto 2014, 358).

Stanley and Jackson explicitly define the everyday as a “site of practice,” pointing to the need for “micro-level research” into everyday narratives to understand how people make sense of the world in the day to day (Stanley and Jackson 2016, 230–33). Much work in urban studies and political geography also takes space as the starting point for analyses of everyday security. Here, public spaces, particularly urban spaces, are at the center.⁴ For example, Hagmann (2017) develops a “spatial heuristic” to compare security assemblages in three different urban locations, pointing to the mundane processes taking place within security ensembles. Amoore demonstrates and draws out how algorithmic practices of the war on terror take place in “mundane spaces” like supermarket checkouts and subways, contributing to “securitisation in everyday life” (Amoore 2009, 50). Liu and Yuan (2019) analyze how urban planning embeds securitization in public spaces in order to regulate, manage, and reassert control. In contrast, Mac Ginty (2014, 552) points to the ways in which things that happen outside “the formal political sphere,” including “bottom-up” and “localised” practices in mundane spaces, are central for understanding everyday peace.

An interest in mundane locations can also be found in much feminist work on everyday security, which emphasizes the need to recognize and politicize the historically embedded distinctions between public and private space. Enloe points to the importance of studying what happens in “kitchens, bedrooms, and secretarial pools ... pubs, brothels, squash courts, and factory lunch rooms—and village wells

⁴ Indeed, for Lefebvre too, the city street is “the quintessential space of the everyday” (Sheringham 2006, 19).

and refugee camp latrines” (Enloe 2011, 447). Both Eschle (2018) and Rowley and Weldes emphasize everyday spaces as the spaces of non-elites, arguing that

security is done in spaces we scholars ... often ignore, or downplay: the bedroom, the playground, the coffee shop, the cinema, the swimming pool, the construction site and the office are just some examples. (Rowley and Weldes 2012, 526)

They draw on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to argue that popular culture is also part of the “everyday discursive terrain” in which in/secureities are theorized (Rowley and Weldes 2012, 521).

Another subset of this scholarship can be identified in critical military studies, where a similar argument works to politicize and disrupt binary notions of military/civilian spaces. Tidy’s analysis of contemporary military charity food brands finds that such brands market their products—from “Eggs for Soldiers” to “Forces Sauces”—in a way that “permeates military logics and values into the banal everyday spaces of the supermarket, kitchen, and dinner table” (Tidy 2015, 221). Similarly, Basham has analyzed how the Poppy Appeal mobilizes “multiple spaces of the everyday,” from “Tube stations to Facebook and Twitter feeds” to create particular narratives of war, suggesting that such “everyday sites and practices” animate and co-constitute “the geopolitical” (Basham 2016, 888, 891). Åhäll argues that war is normalized in everyday sites by analyzing two cases where “military moves disrupt civilian spaces.” Here, the everyday is an empirical site, a space in which politics happens and where “policies are normalized” (Åhäll 2019, 151–52; see also Henry and Natanel 2016). There is also a normative agenda: in calls for “seeing everyday IR,” Åhäll (2019, 162) argues that through analyzing the “micro politics of bodies, affect and movement” in everyday spaces we can “reintroduce society into global politics.”

From bedrooms to subways, public parks, supermarkets, social media feeds, and the *Buffyverse*, in/security is (re)produced and experienced in mundane locations outside of formal politics. By reintroducing everyday spaces into analyses of global politics, we gain a deeper and more accurate understanding of security. Demonstrating that politics is everywhere, analyses of mundane spaces draw attention to the constitutive and intertwined relationship between the everyday and the international.

Practice

The second dimension emphasizes routine practices. Here, temporality defines the everyday: routine, repetitive, habitual daily doings that are often fleeting and seem insignificant. Scholars who emphasize the temporal aspect of the everyday analyze a wide range of routine practices, whether of/by elites, ordinary people, technologies, systems of governance, or material objects. These routine doings often—but not always—take place outside the spaces of formal politics or security governance. For example, for Enloe, the everyday is about things that happen day to day, whether behaviors, ideas, or feelings: “the everyday is routine. It is what appears to be unexceptional ...” (Enloe 2011, 447). Because they happen routinely, these practices seem unimportant and devoid of power: mundanity defines the routine, so this is not just about repetition, but about (seeming) unimportance. Scholars focusing on this dimension of the everyday demonstrate that practices that seem unremarkable, unimportant, or unthinking can also be political or have political effects.

One subset of this literature focuses on the routine practices of security professionals, from border agencies to data collectors and diplomats to combatants. Huysmans points to the diffuse security processes that “appear as banal, little security nothings” (Huysmans 2011; see also Bigo 2002). Côté-Boucher et al. look

at the everyday practices of various powerbrokers involved in securing borders—including their “everyday professional routines and administrative procedures” and the ways in which these practices enact or make border security (Côté-Boucher, Infantino, and Salter 2014, 195). Neumann (2002) draws out everyday localized diplomatic practices in the Norwegian High North. At the international level, Bueger’s analysis of African maritime security practice looks at the everyday practices through which “actors engage with one another, build shared repertoires, construct securitizations, and develop joint enterprises” in order to make security communities (Bueger 2013, 303). Adler-Nissen and Pouliot study the everyday practices of diplomacy, analyzing what state agents and international actors actually do “on an everyday basis,” arguing that “the everyday performance of international politics ... [is] a generative force in and of itself” (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 891). They find that such “micro-level” diplomatic practices are crucial for understanding international negotiations (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 909).

In studies of war and peacekeeping, Crane-Seeber draws out the everyday practices that normalize war for combatants, such as repetitive shooting drills, arguing that COIN represents a “long-term routinisation of overseas occupations” (Crane-Seeber 2011, 450–51). Basham analyzes “the everyday practices of [British] military personnel” and how these underpin the wider geopolitics of war (Basham 2013, 7). Meanwhile Higate and Henry analyze how the routine practices of UN peacekeepers constitute everyday security, including how these embodied practices or performances change the space in which they take place. They theorize the practice as a performance, analyzing “peacekeeping choreographies” (Higate and Henry 2010, 42). In the process, they are also interested in how these practices are experienced on the ground: the extent to which they make people *feel* safe (see the next section) (Higate and Henry 2010, 34).

Others have examined how ordinary people make security in their daily lives, including the “disruptive potential” of such practices. There is some blurring with the third dimension here, as some of these authors also consider how ordinary people experience security or the extent to which they feel in/secure. Rowley and Weldes argue in favor of a broader focus to recognize “everyday security practitioners” and the myriad ways in which security is made by ordinary people from day to day: “everyone, not just academics and policy elites, does security. Theorizing is both a form of practice and an inescapable component of practice.” Consequently, they argue, we need to listen to ordinary people, “in order to discover the wealth of what we do not know about how in/securities are theorized and, crucially, how these are theorized in and through everyday practices” (Rowley and Weldes 2012, 526). Building on this, Eschle (2018) emphasizes the role that ordinary people can play as security activists, pushing alternative agendas. Research on everyday peace has demonstrated that individuals and groups use “routinised practices” to minimize conflict in divided societies (Mac Ginty 2014, 549). Groups also self-organize, developing “everyday practices for conflict management” to build peace in their local communities (Chaves, Aarts, and Van Bommel 2020, 54).

Lastly, some scholars research the daily routine practices of (often disembodied and depoliticized) security technologies, such as big data collection, risk management, and surveillance (Amoore 2009; de Goede 2012). Amoore’s analysis of algorithmic war points to the “mundane and prosaic calculations” happening simultaneously in, and exceeding distinctions between, “military/civil/commercial spheres” (Amoore 2009, 50). These are not just routine practices that seem unimportant or unreflected upon: these practices are automated through algorithmic calculations, depoliticizing them further. In a similar vein, Aradau (2010) analyzes the ways in which material objects articulate (in)security, looking at how securitization makes critical infrastructure an object of protection.

These approaches all share an understanding of the everyday as temporal, as existing in daily routine practices. They also tell us something about scale: the everyday cuts across the local to the global, capturing routine diplomatic practices and negotiations as well as ordinary people's daily theorizing of in/security. As [Guillaume \(2011, 460\)](#) notes, the international is also a "processual phenomenon." Understanding the temporal aspect of everyday security provides another piece of the puzzle, contributing to a deeper understanding of how security is made. It also helps us understand and unpack how security practices (whether algorithms, technologies, administrative procedures, or shooting drills) are normalized and made possible through routine, repetition, and perceived non-importance. At the same time, while power can reside in or grow out of routines that seem "pre-political," these can also be disrupted by ordinary people.

Affect

The third and final dimension analyzes the everyday through lived experiences of in/security. This includes scholarship on the embodied and affective aspects of lived experience, as well as research on vernacular security. For theorists of everyday life, the everyday is a perpetual process that is *lived through* ([Sheringham 2006, 22](#)). Lived experiences are emotional, affective, and embodied, which makes them difficult to pin down and even harder to research. Affect theorists tend to focus on "embodied experiences" that "often remain unseen, unnoticed and unrecognised" and emerge when bodies encounter other bodies, spaces, objects, and atmospheres ([Gregory and Åhäll 2015, 5](#)). This opens up interesting parallels with Lefebvre's understanding of everyday life as preconscious and unthinking residual. This dimension is where Crawford and Hutchinson's overall contribution is situated, unpacking how individuals experience security governance.⁵ Drawing on research on emotions and affect, they emphasize what in/security *feels like*.

Emotions also play an important role in shaping how we experience security measures, how we respond to individual and group perceptions of insecurity and traumatic events, and the practices we engage in to manage our own safety. ([Crawford and Hutchinson 2016, 1196](#))

Feminist work on everyday security brings together theories on affect and embodiment to study lived experiences of in/security ([Åhäll 2019, 152–53](#); see also [Wibben 2011](#)). Ochs' detailed ethnography demonstrates how everyday security practices are implicated in the reproduction of fear and violence in contemporary Israel. She argues that everyday security is a "cultural practice and a communal experience that crafts social life and is also an intimate experience that shapes individual subjectivity" ([Ochs 2011, 4](#)). She finds that "national discourses of security are reproduced at the level of bodily practice" ([Ochs 2011, 4](#)). Thus, national security "assumes social, material, and aesthetic forms in daily life" and can be seen in everyday feelings and relationships ([Ochs 2011, 3](#)). This in turn has consequences, since affect has effects: "what should matter for studies of (global) politics is what emotions do politically" ([Åhäll 2018](#)). In related work, Smith has studied how (in)security "is understood and experienced in everyday life," pointing to the "lived terrain of security" in an analysis of how security claims are constructed in Nairobi ([Smith 2015, 137](#)).

A growing literature on war and militarization also draws attention to affective and embodied experiences. [Basham \(2013\)](#) analyzes the lived experiences of British

⁵ I address their contribution here, since although Crawford and Hutchinson suggest everyday security has spatial, temporal, and emotional features, in their framework these all focus on individual lived experience—their discussion of space focuses on "spaces of experience" while temporality is used to understand how people experience the temporality of security projects and governance ([Crawford and Hutchinson 2016, 1193–94](#)).

soldiers and how these underpin the geopolitics of war. In other work, she has drawn out the broader “everyday reproduction of militarism through fear, desire and ambivalence” (Basham 2018, 34). Tidy (2019) has highlighted the embodied politics of making war through an analysis of “sewing for soldiers” campaigns. Meanwhile Parashar has drawn out how war “can be captured in daily and mundane lived experiences of people and in powerful emotions that constitute ‘self,’ community and the ‘other’” (Parashar 2013, 615): rather than an exception, “wars become a way of living,” “a state of being” (Parashar 2013, 618–20; see also Sylvester 2013). Higate and Henry’s analysis of how UN peacekeepers perform security also engages with “embodied affect, mood and feeling” to understand the extent to which this makes local populations *feel* secure (Higate and Henry 2010, 44). In a related vein, Lemanski critiques the top-down approach of human security agendas, arguing that they need to recognize local and “everyday perceptions and experiences” of insecurity, particularly in the Global South (Lemanski 2012, 74).

Scholars who focus on “vernacular security” also analyze lived experiences of in/security, in many cases focusing specifically on how ordinary people articulate that lived experience. Stump (2017) draws on this to summarize the turn to the everyday in security studies as a “turn towards the ordinary person.” Jarvis and Lister use focus groups to analyze how UK publics talk about and make sense of (in)security, to improve understanding of “localised conceptions of security” and how they take shape (Jarvis and Lister 2012, 159). Vaughan-Williams and Stevens go on to analyze how citizens “conceptualise and experience” (in)security and how they engage with or resist the state’s attempts to “enlist” them in resilience building efforts (Vaughan-Williams and Stevens 2016, 41). They have a similar normative emphasis on “non-elite knowledge” but here also use this to think about how vernacular constructions of security might disrupt or challenge dominant conceptions (Vaughan-Williams and Stevens 2016, 45). There are key parallels here with research on ontological security, in that both are interested in “biographical narratives of the self” and making visible “everyday ‘security speak’” (Croft and Vaughan-Williams 2017, 27, 25; see also da Silva and Crilley 2017).

Innes brings together work on affect with theories of ontological security, suggesting this can provide insight into how security is experienced by different people in the everyday, analyzing storylines about migration in British soaps (Innes 2017, 383). She finds that “affective environments provide the resources for forming, reforming, and performing identities that, in turn, sustain a feeling of ontological security” (Innes 2017, 394). Adey has analyzed how “security produces atmospheres” in everyday life, and the ways in which atmospheres shape how security encounters *feel* (Adey 2014, 835). Adey et al. analyzed atmospheres of security in two train stations, arguing that atmospheres are “by-products of (sometimes random) activities, collections of things and events,” but are nevertheless an important part of how “secured spaces are experienced, lived and addressed” (Adey et al. 2013, 308; see also Fregonese 2017).

Here, security is something that is experienced and lived through affectively, sometimes in unrecognized and overlooked ways. Authors share an interest in understanding the lived experiences of those considered to be without power, whose experiences have traditionally been overlooked, and what shaped those experiences. There are also common themes around reorienting power in some of this work, both through attempts to understand how people actually experience in/security in their daily lives (in some cases, accompanied by policy advice for addressing overlooked experiences of insecurity) and in work aiming to understand how people can resist or disrupt national security discourses.

Everyday security has three dimensions: it is situated and (re)produced in (1) *mundane spaces* outside formal politics (spatial everyday); (2) the *routine practices* of

security professionals, ordinary citizens, technologies, and objects (temporal everyday); and (3) *lived experiences* of individuals and groups (affective everyday). For analytical clarity, I have presented these dimensions as distinct; in practice, they interact and the lines between them are sometimes blurred. This can also be seen in my empirical analysis. However, understanding everyday security through these three dimensions adds much needed conceptual and analytical clarity. At times, authors are using the label everyday to talk about quite different things. Drawing out these three dimensions more clearly demonstrates how they each speak to a bigger whole, bringing these bodies of work together with the aim of starting a productive conversation and a basis on which we can build. This matters for understanding security.

Each dimension also tells us something about power, demonstrating that the everyday life of security is political. By bringing the ordinary—the seemingly non-political—back to politics, these bodies of work demonstrate the political relevance of what is common. In the process, they decenter how we think about politics and political relevance, making political life abundant (see [Guillaume and Huysmans 2019](#), 285). Bringing the three dimensions together strengthens their individual contributions, speaking to this common goal.

There is an ethical imperative here, in understanding and highlighting the experiences of the less powerful who have historically been neglected in studies of IR. Other aspects of this work also highlight how ordinary or routine practices are complicit in securitization, or how security practices (re)inscribe borders and boundaries between us and them, threat and referent, citizen and other. This is not just about adding the everyday and stirring, it requires recognizing the ways in which our lack of understanding of the everyday has contributed to, and constituted, understandings of security. Understanding the ways in which security operates at an everyday level (both temporally and spatially), how people feel, experience, and enact it in their daily lives, is crucial for understanding the politics of in/security. So how can we capture these dimensions, given the “methodological elitism” ([Stanley and Jackson 2016](#), 224) of the field? The second half of this paper starts to work through the methodological implications.

Capturing the Everyday

Participatory Photography as Method

Accessing the everyday is an ongoing methodological challenge. Existing work uses a wide range of methods, from ethnographic methods like observation to interviews and focus groups, but these rarely cut across space, practice, and affect, struggling in particular to capture the embodied and affective aspects of everyday security (see [Jarvis 2019](#), 121). Participatory photography offers a way to cut across and capture all three dimensions of everyday security. I use “participatory photography” to describe my combination of two methods: auto-photography and photo-elicitation. I recruited six participants who each took a series of photographs about security in everyday life (auto-photography), which were then discussed in detail during follow-up interviews (photo-elicitation). Both are part of a group of research methods that have grown out of visual anthropology ([Collier 1957](#); see also [Collier 1967](#)). Today, they are more popular in sociology and geography, with many variants and labels, including photo-interviews ([Collier 1957](#); [Vila 2013](#)), photovoice (see [Marguiles 2019](#)), photo-elicitation ([Harper 2002](#), 15), photo-response ([Alam, McGregor, and Houston 2018](#)), and auto-photography ([Lombard 2013](#); [Vastapuu 2018b](#)). Participatory photography can unpack the three dimensions of the everyday in a novel and exciting way. To my knowledge, there is only one existing study deploying a similar method in IR: Vastapuu’s excellent study of women war veterans in Liberia

(Vastapuu 2018a, 2018b).⁶ The production of visual materials is especially under-explored in IR and security studies,⁷ and work that does exist tends to use visual materials “to present research points rather than as a method or research tool” (Vuori and Andersen 2018, 13).

The combination of auto-photography and photo-elicitation creates a unique dataset that cuts across the three dimensions of everyday security. The photographs provide an entry point for in-depth conversations about the mundane spaces and routine practices in which participants encounter and (re)produce security, which in turn provoked deeper reflections on their lived experiences of in/security. Using photographs in interviews provokes qualitatively different responses, evoking “a *different kind of information*” (Harper 2002, 13, emphasis added). It offers an alternative to purely verbal communication, opening doors to talking about subjects that might otherwise be difficult to voice. Centering interviews around participant-produced photographs also puts participants in charge of the interview: they are telling their own story, visually and verbally representing themselves and their own experience. The photographs themselves are part of the data and visually portray the spaces, practices, and experiences that participants themselves associate with security. This adds a nonverbal element: the photographs can “capture that which evades textual description” (Marguiles 2019, 4). Indeed, participatory photography is an “active method of creative practice” (Marguiles 2019, 2), creating a visual means for exploring embodied and affective experiences of security. At the same time, in-depth interviews allow deeper insight into how participants themselves interpret their experience, and the affective context within which they make sense of a particular image.

Participatory photography has particular advantages for understanding the everyday life of security. It captures “vignettes of social life as it happens,” engaging participants to interpret “their everyday places and practices through the production of images” (Alam, McGregor, and Houston 2018, 2). Used in this way, photography is “closely aligned with lived experience” (Winton 2016) and offers valuable insight into “how ... less powerful people see their place in the world” (Rose 2008, 154). It can help us to “amplify silent voices” (Vastapuu 2018a, 184), while the use of photographs can bridge the gap between often abstract academic questions and the lifeworlds of participants. Putting participants in charge, the method flips power to see participants as “producers of knowledge” (Vila 2013, 52). We can never escape our own positionality, but participatory photography allows more direct access into the positionality of others. It is especially valuable in authoritarian contexts since it can be carried out anonymously and at a small scale, protecting participants.

The photographs were particularly helpful for provoking engagement with, and reflections on, “visual positionality” (Bleiker 2019, 290). Although introduced as part of a visual autoethnography where Bleiker reflects on his own photographs, his notion that visual positionality can be used to expose politics and power relations is very useful here. Photographs or experiences are never neutral or value free, and my aim here is not to represent an “authentic experience.” In contrast, photographs reveal positionality, demonstrating that security discourses are “always partial and have as much to do with who is viewing—and securing—than what is being seen and secured” (Bleiker 2019, 275). The photographs taken by my participants juxtapose and challenge prevailing visual and political discourses about security in China. This is not about showing the “truth.” However, it does illustrate that dominant discourses (whether Western or Chinese) are political and selective (see Bleiker 2019, 274). Used in this way, visual positionality has potential to reveal the “partial, political, and often problematic nature” of entrenched/dominant/prevaling political

⁶ This particular combination of methods has been more common in geography (see Lombard 2013; Alam, McGregor, and Houston 2018; Marguiles 2019).

⁷ Film making is a notable exception here (see Der Derian 2010; Weber 2011; Callahan 2015; Harman 2019).

discourses and practices (Bleiker 2019, 275). What makes this project particularly unique is the active participation of ordinary citizens, who introduce their own perspectives and positionality both verbally through interviews and visually through their photographs.

My use of participatory photography is situated in visual ethnographic methods (see Pink 2013). Ethnographic methods are underpinned by long-term immersion and the situated knowledge this develops: in my case, anthropological sensibility developed over ten years of working on China underpins much of the analysis and analytical choices made. At the same time, ethnography comes with an uncomfortable colonial legacy (see Lisle and Johnson 2019, 29). Photography itself is rooted in the colonial gaze on the colonized subject (Edwards 2011). Speaking for, or on behalf of, subjugated “others” is at best ethically complicated: there is a politics to carrying out fieldwork in a country that is not one’s own (Harman 2019).

My participatory photography project was undertaken in Beijing during late Spring 2018. I hired a local research assistant and together we recruited six participants drawing on our pre-existing relationships and connections (see also Lombard 2013, 24). Our participants were all long-term residents of Beijing, with diverse backgrounds, ages, gender, and socioeconomic status. We asked each participant to create a photo diary of around ten photographs, documenting their encounters with and experiences of (in)security during one week of their lives. Beyond this, we gave little guidance other than suggesting that the photos “could be of people/places/activities/things that you consider relevant to security” and asked them to reflect in the process on the question of what “security” means to them and how security intersects with their daily life. We conducted two interviews with each participant, one at the beginning of their week to talk through the project, and one at the end, during which participants told us about their photographs and their experience. Interviews were largely conducted in Mandarin, and in locations guided by the participants themselves. The most serious ethical challenge we faced involved protecting participants, for whom participating in a foreign-led research project on a sensitive subject may have had repercussions. In response, we undertook a range of precautions to minimize risk (for more details on sampling, method, and ethics strategy, see the online appendix; see also Nyman 2019).

It provided a dataset of 142 photographs (some participants enthusiastically provided far more than the required number) and many pages of interview notes, which were later coded in NVivo to draw out key themes using an abductive method moving between the conceptual framework and the empirical material, on the basis of which the three dimensions were developed. Interviews were guided by the participants, who talked through their photos and their experience. The photographs served as prompts, in many cases eliciting new interpretations and “unintended connections” (Lisle 2011, 874), resulting in in-depth conversations about the participants’ past encounters with, and feelings about, in/security and opening space for nuanced and sometimes difficult conversations.

Like every method, participatory photography has limits. It is time-consuming, and comes with risk and responsibility: particularly in authoritarian contexts. Here, paying attention to what Rose terms “reflexive vigilance” is helpful: “the careful and consistent awareness of what the researcher is doing, why, and with what possible consequences in terms of the power relations between researcher and researched” (Rose 2012, 253). My research assistant and I both undertook a lot of extra work in our efforts to keep participants safe and to keep participation anonymous (see the online appendix). At the same time, this context also made undertaking the project feel more important, as a way to amplify unheard voices and allow participants to speak in a way that is safe. This was also voiced by several participants, one of whom noted: “it is very important for me to feel that someone wants to know about this, and will listen to my concerns” (Xinhua, 2018).

Last, a note on language. Lived experiences of security are contextually specific and contingent (Bubandt 2005; Nyman 2016, 2018). Security is socially situated, and people experience it differently in different places at different times. It is also shaped by history, culture, and language: as I have explored elsewhere, the Mandarin word for security (安全/*anquan*) has broader connotations that include personal safety (Nyman 2021; see also Luckham 2017). Security does not always translate easily. This also has implications for how people interpret in/security (see also Wilkinson 2013, 138). Here, I kept the concept open, to see what the participants themselves would interpret as relevant. Visual methods were particularly useful, giving participants the opportunity to portray in their photographs what they themselves considered or experienced as security.

Snapshots of the Everyday Life of Security in Contemporary China

At the state level, security in China has long had broad connotations (Beeson 2014). Since President Xi Jinping took over in 2013, he has broadened security further by introducing a new “comprehensive national security concept” including eleven areas of traditional and nontraditional threats to respond to the “unprecedented challenges” facing China today (Renmin Ribao 2014). At the heart of these changes sits a concern over “political security,” understood as the survival of the CCP regime (You 2016, 179). There is no separation between internal and external security within the system, and since 2011 China’s domestic security budget exceeds the budget for external defense (Guo 2012, 445). This growing “security paranoia” (You 2016, 180) is reflected in Chinese society and daily life, especially in Beijing, the capital city and the center of state power. Security checkpoints around the city have multiplied and restrictions on movement and behavior have tightened. Increasing numbers of security personnel⁸ patrol the streets. Information control has been strengthened, with growing online and offline censorship and monitoring. While there are studies analyzing the perspectives of Chinese elites on security,⁹ there are to my knowledge no existing studies that analyze the experiences of ordinary citizens.

The rest of this paper demonstrates and draws out the three dimensions of the everyday life of security through a participatory photography project undertaken in Beijing in 2018. In the process, it shows the advantages of using participatory photography to capture space, practice, and affect, as well as the ways in which they intersect. In my participants’ stories and photographs, security goes far beyond the state and state policy, though it also reflects how state security governance is felt and lived through. We see both the high politics of security—state-led efforts to contain, control, and secure the existence of the state, and the everyday routine practices of living in, traversing, managing, making, and feeling those spaces by human beings. Security happens in mundane spaces all around you: in the words of Meigui, “it is everywhere in life.” Participants talked about the routine practices they themselves undertake to produce security, alongside their habitual encounters with state security governance and personnel. The stories and photographs also represent participants’ lived experience, but this dimension is more difficult to access. Participatory photography helps through the partial

⁸Four separate groups of security professionals featured widely in accounts: *jingcha* (police), *xiejing* (assistant police), *chengguan* (municipal police/urban control teams that operate as part of the Urban Management Bureau, separately from the regular police force), and *baoran* (security guards, employed either privately or by city agencies to undertake security maintenance tasks like manning security checks or street security).

⁹Actually, despite the domestic emphasis of much of Chinese security policy, the English language literature on security in China tends to focus on external threats, analyzing foreign and military policy (for instance, see Nathan and Scobell 2012; Dittmer and Yu 2015). Chinese language literature on security often has a stronger focus on internal security (see, for example, Yu Xiaofeng 2014; Ren Xiao 2017).

removal of the researcher, allowing participants to decide what experiences are important to them. At the same time, expressing atmosphere and affect is difficult. It requires pinning down and putting into words what is ambiguous, what is felt, sometimes at a preconscious and embodied level (Adey et al. 2013, 308). Here, I hope the photographs go some way toward communicating what is difficult to express in words.

The rest of this section centers the stories and photographs of my participants, providing four illustrative “snapshots” to demonstrate the three dimensions and the ways in which they intersect, intertwine, and weave in and out of people’s stories and photographs. To avoid verbal repetition while preserving clarity, I have numbered the three dimensions. Consequently, a statement or photograph representing a particular dimension is followed by its reference number: mundane spaces [1]; routine practices [2]; or affect or lived experience [3]. The section ends with a table summarizing how each snapshot demonstrates dimensions 1–3. The names of my participants have been changed, but their pseudonyms and basic information are as follows: Daxian (male, 20s, migrant), Zeqi (male, 40s), Xinhua (female, 50s), Meigui (female, 20s), Lijun (female, 40s, migrant), and Jiang (male, 20s).

Snapshot 1: “It’s bullshit ... look at this guy, he’s asleep!”

One of the ways in which the government’s increasing security paranoia is expressed is through growing numbers of security personnel and security checks on the streets and in the subway stations of Beijing [1]. These featured heavily in the stories told by my participants and in the photographs they shared with me. Lijun and Meigui were largely supportive, with Meigui reflecting: “sometimes I feel like it’s a little too much, but if I think about it, it’s a precaution, so it’s probably good” [3]. Jiang had more mixed feelings. He pointed to the performative nature of overstaffing public spaces from buses to supermarkets with security guards or plastering walls with government propaganda about security [1,2]:

For some local officials doing this, it means they can show results to the central government ... it’s a bit like finishing homework and showing the higher-ups that they are doing what they’re asked to. [2]

In contrast, my conversations with Zeqi revealed a deep-seated skepticism about security guards and assistant police in particular, which he saw as “basically decorative.” He experienced the security checks as “a complete waste of time”: “it’s bullshit, they hire so many people to do these security checks and look at this guy, he’s asleep!” (photo below) [2,3]. His photo portrays an empty security check, with four security guards manning two large metal detectors, and a fifth guard sleeping in front of computer screens showing live footage of the empty checkpoint from twelve different angles. There is something both comical and rather pathetic about it. Xinhua was more critical. She told me that she often saw low-level municipal police¹⁰ patrolling in her neighborhood [1,2], but they did not make her feel safe: “if something happens they are on the side of the government” [3]. She included a photo of an old man selling herbs in the street when he was hassled by security staff, saying: “Actually I think they are the opposite of security. They don’t look after the ordinary people” [1,3]. She saw them as a “tool of the government,” and a “tiny part of the stability maintenance [*weiwen*] industry.”

¹⁰ *chengguan*: see footnote 8.



It's bullshit ... look at this guy, he's asleep! (Zeqi) [1,2,3].

These contrasting stories and photographs about the state's security governance stand out. The physical, material, and visual ritual of the security check and the security patrol "represent and legitimize the very substance of security: what a threat is and who is able to offer protection from it" (Bleiker 2018b, 193) [1,2]. But it also raises the crucial question of who is made to feel safe by these rituals. Affective atmospheres are deeply shaped by positionality (Fregonese 2017, 4) and personal experience, but the difference in feeling here also delineates and distinguishes between those who are supportive or ambivalent about the state and those who are more critical [3]. The state's security governance can be a source of security for some, but a source of ridicule or insecurity to others. Here, the visual method and positionality is crucial: the photographs themselves theorize in/security and power very differently. Positive photos of successful security checks from Lijun and Meigui contrast Zeqi's more cynical take, further contrasted by Xinhua's submissions of multiple photographs depicting police violence. All portray different affective atmospheres and very different relations between citizens and the state [3].

Snapshot 2: "Physically safe, yes ... but I also don't feel that secure"

The intensification of security practices, personnel, and technologies such as censorship and surveillance provoked mixed feelings for Daxian [2,3]. On the one hand, he spoke very favorably of China's low crime rates, comparing China to the United States. In this sense, he saw the constant presence of security personnel as preserving stability and creating a feeling of physical security [2,3]. He included a photograph of an ID spot-check in the subway, with security personnel scanning the ID cards of members of the public (photo below) [1,2,3]. At the same time, he found that the numbers of security staff produced a strange atmosphere of "tension":

Everywhere you go, there's tons of security, like all public places, there are tons of security. So physically safe, yes, I feel really secured, but I also don't *feel* that secure.
[3]

He started telling me about the security staff he photographed in the subway and on the train on his commute to work [1], but found they provoked mixed feelings: "I think it's both secure and insecure. Everywhere you have security around, and all this security also makes people feel a bit insecure at the same time" [2,3].



They just randomly check people (Daxian) [1,2,3].

He pointed to growing surveillance and shrinking freedom of expression to try to explain his feelings:

So from my perspective it definitely feels safer but also more controlled. The safety is within a certain limit. If you're a good citizen, you'll be so safe, you'll be protected, but if you're bad, like if you commit crimes ... or something, you can't do anything because everything is linked to your ID—internet, phones, trains, hotels, bank cards, social media, finances, work, everything you need to use your ID for. Everything is linked directly to you. [2,3]

Government control of the internet and digital services made him feel particularly anxious [1,3]. He told me:

For example, my dad used to participate in protest—he used his phone to resend messages about a protest and the local police got his information and invited him “to have a cup of tea in the local police station,” so I think that's very insecure. [1,2,3]

Here, national security materializes in everyday encounters with security personnel and internet surveillance [2]. As seen in Daxian's stories and photographs, the security state is embodied and affective, it acts on bodies. Zeqi had similar feelings, but both Daxian and Zeqi also echoed state narratives about the West (in particular, the United States) as chaotic and unsafe. Daxian placed his experiences in a broader political and social context, reflecting on state power and security: “... the government is trying really hard to maintain power, so physically we are safer but we are also more controlled ... the government definitely interfere in day-to-day life much more than they used to” [2,3].

Snapshot 3: “There used to be villages here, but they're all gone now”

For Jiang, feelings of insecurity were closely tied to economic uncertainty and change. On the one hand, he saw the growing strength of the government and nation as a source of pride and economic opportunity, but at the same time he was very concerned about growing inequality and the lack of predictability. These feelings were reflected in the physical and material changes he sees around himself day to day [1,2]. Jiang included among his images a series of photographs reflecting on government campaigns to remove “low-end populations”¹¹ from parts of the city

¹¹ *Diduan renkou*: a term originally used by the government to refer to migrants, now widely censored.

[1,2]. He wondered aloud on the meaning and purpose of such government-led projects: “maybe it will decrease the risk of other social conflicts ... This project just makes the life of the low-end population harder” [3].



The so-called beautiful neighborhood project (Jiang) [1,2,3].

At the same time, he thought, all governments do such things:

I don't like revolution, I have to live in China after all! It does affect the security of the owners of the stores. Lots of people have lost their jobs and have to return to their hometowns ... [2,3]

He thought such projects might affect national security, but “in a very subtle way, supporting stability” [3].

Jiang also included a photograph taken from a moving train, of the Daxing district in Beijing. It shows what looks like an abandoned semi-green space with a few trees and piles of soil dotted around:



There used to be villages here but they're all gone now (Jiang) [1,2].

There are a lot of places like this—there used to be villages here but they're all gone now. It's all a big empty space ... I've seen it change very significantly. The people living there are mostly migrants [*waidiren*]. And I don't think most of them are educated. So I think they are who are most affected by this [1,3].

The photograph centers and juxtaposes different visions of economic development and its consequences. The blurred subway tracks hint at the fast pace of development, while the razed site and the gray sky create a feeling of abandonment.

After our discussions about the beautiful neighborhood project, I asked Jiang how he felt about his own security. He replied:

I worry that something like these [forced] evacuations will happen—maybe in another way, but it can happen to me too [2] ... I think the Chinese society is rising and most are positive. But also many don't feel safe ... my biggest worry is economic security ... I don't know where my feelings of insecurity are coming from—the government's centralization of power or my own pursuit of happiness. [3]

The material changes illustrated in his photographs place stability at the heart of Jiang's vision of security. His stories reinforce and echo the state's national security narratives that stress the threat of "social conflict" and the importance of a strong state. At the same time, these photographs are very different from images we might traditionally associate with security. His stories stress the differential impact of development, in particular on migrant workers and poorer populations, raising the question of who is made safe by development.

Snapshot 4: "Security is in every corner of our lives"

Xinhua felt strongly that "the situation [in China] is growing worse," pointing to growing authoritarianism and a division between the experiences and feelings of ordinary people and the state's approach to security:

Security is in every corner of our lives. When speaking about security, China cares about national security, not the security of the individual. But for individuals, we care about things like traffic security and food security ... I also feel very insecure about personal private information, especially online. Those who are in dissent with the government are very vulnerable. They are watched online and sometimes even followed in real life. [1,2,3]

She had strong concerns about excess security and the power it gives to the government, who she saw as abusing its power and failing to protect ordinary people [3]. She saw the system as increasingly broken, including in her collection a photograph she had found online, of the body of a now-deceased man who she told me had attempted to petition the central government in Beijing but was "violently stopped" by local government [2]. She added:

All the security issues in China come because human rights are not protected at all. So no one feels safe ... If we are not protected there is no security. [3]

Growing state surveillance and decreasing tolerance of critical views was something she felt personally affected by. She was a member of more critical groups on social media, which allowed her to access and share more critical content, but she felt the shrinking space for dissent very keenly [1,2,3]. Overall, she said, "I feel more and more unsafe" [3]. She included a photograph of a man on a bicycle wearing a white T-shirt with text on it:



He wrote his feelings of unfairness on his white T-shirt (Xinhua) [3].

I saw this guy at a junction in Beijing near Tiananmen Square. He wrote his feelings of unfairness on his white T-shirt. It says “Chinese style society—people who obey the laws are found guilty, those who don’t are not punished.” [3]

Xinhua’s photos and stories express a growing divide between the interests and security of the state and the people. She saw national security policies materializing in the form of inequality, repression, and state violence, showing me photographs and videos of security personnel and police committing acts of brutality and violence¹² [1,2,3]. She placed more recent developments in historical context, arguing that insecurity and repression has increased since Xi Jinping came into power in 2013. She was particularly concerned about growing inequality, censorship, control of information, and human rights, but also environmental insecurity, including increasing air pollution and contaminated food products and medicine [2,3]. At the same time, for Xinhua, the everyday is also a space for resistance and contestation, and she saw participating in the project as part of this.

Participatory photography captures all three dimensions of the everyday life of security (see figure 1) while also recognizing the ways in which they intertwine. These stories and photographs help us to understand multilevel processes: how people experience politics, what meanings they attach to “macro-level political processes,” and how they respond (Bayard de Volo 2009, 222). They tell us something about the social life of security, about what security *means*, how it *feels*, what “conditions, objects, experiences, or relationships *create* security and insecurity,” and what *values* participants associate with security (see Jarvis 2019, 116). Security happens all

¹² I have excluded these for ethical reasons; see the online appendix for full explanation.

Dimension: Snapshots:	Mundane spaces [1]	Routine practices [2]	Lived experience/affect [3]
Snapshot 1: “It’s bullshit...look at this guy, he’s asleep!”	Local transport system; city street; supermarket	Security checks; security patrols by assistant police, urban control teams, and security guards; security propaganda posters	“it’s probably good” (Meigui); Scepticism and frustration (Zeqi); Anxiety and concern over misuse of power and impact on ordinary people (Xinhua)
Snapshot 2: “Physically safe, yes...but I also don’t feel that secure”	Local transport system; city street; online (including social media); private phone communications; home; work	Security checks; security patrols on the streets; physical and online surveillance; integration of different systems of control and surveillance linked to citizen ID cards (internet, phone, trains, hotels, bank cards, social, media, finances, work)	An embodied and affective awareness of increasing security personnel and checkpoints producing physical security but also an atmosphere of “tension” and a <i>feeling</i> of insecurity: “it definitely feels safer but also more controlled” (Daxian)
Snapshot 3: “There used to be villages here, but they’re all gone now”	City street; construction sites; homes; shops	Forced evacuations; neighbourhood reconstruction	“Lots of people have lost their jobs and have to return to their hometowns” “many don’t feel safe...my biggest worry is economic security...I don’t know where my feelings of insecurity are coming from - the government’s centralisation of power or my own pursuit of happiness” (Jiang)
Snapshot 4: “Security is in every corner of our lives”	Online; city street; kitchen; hospital; social media feeds	Surveillance, censorship, police abuse of power, police violence, resistance	“Those who are in dissent with the government are very vulnerable. They are watched online and sometimes even followed in real life” “I feel more and more unsafe” (Xinhua)

Figure 1. Three dimensions of the everyday life of security in four snapshots.

around us. Routines and habits that are part of daily life reproduce security from day to day, encompassing both state security governance practices and ordinary people’s routine practices and the ways in which these engage, resist, or disengage from the state. Positionality shapes lived experiences of in/security. The everyday politics of security in contemporary China involves “relations of power, privilege, and violence” (Squire 2016). At the same time, the everyday is a space for resistance and contestation.

Final Thoughts

This paper has developed a conceptual framework to capture the everyday life of security, building on and synthesizing the existing literature to argue that everyday security has three dimensions: space, practice, and affect. The paper then showed how this conceptual framework can unravel the everyday in a novel way. Capturing all three dimensions of the everyday requires methodological advances in a field that is traditionally focused on elites and “high politics.” The paper deployed a method rarely used in IR, demonstrating the three dimensions through a participatory photography project undertaken in Beijing in 2018. Organized as four “snapshots” combining stories and photographs of the everyday life of security in contemporary Beijing, the empirical analysis draws out and illustrates the three intersecting dimensions of everyday security set out in the conceptual framework. Understanding how security manifests itself in everyday life is key for understanding what security actually is. Consequently, bringing together these three dimensions matters for understanding the concept of security. Each dimension provides a piece of the conceptual puzzle and although the dimensions interact and are sometimes difficult to separate, understanding how each operates is important for conceptual and analytical clarity. Together, they provide a clearer and more comprehensive account of the everyday life of security. Each dimension also tells us something about power, demonstrating that the everyday life of security is political. We need to know what it is we are studying. The mainstream of security studies and IR remains centered on the state or international level. In contrast, this paper demonstrates that security exists and is made and remade in concrete spaces, practices, and experiences.

Studying everyday life tells us something about security, but security also tells us something about everyday life. As argued by Guillaume and Huysmans, the everyday is not a distinct level or scale. Discussions of the everyday in IR have been an invitation to bring back in that which we have overlooked, but “naming the everyday” has consequences: it decenters how we think about politics and political relevance (Guillaume and Huysmans 2019, 281). In the literature on everyday security, the everyday is not just about temporality. Here, the everyday is also about ordinariness, about what is considered to be important and what is not. The everyday is used to say something about where power lies and where it doesn’t, and, in the process, to make visible or indeed to make political that which has been overlooked. Consequently, the everyday reveals that “what is political, the extra-ordinary and ordinary, takes place commonly” (Guillaume and Huysmans 2019, 284). Participatory photography can shed light on political phenomena, revealing complex power relations and challenging the common sense. This reveals the political relevance of these photographs and stories. Inviting us to explore visual positionality—in this case, the visual positionality of others—can help us imagine the world from different perspectives. To return to Bleiker: “how else can we understand and address the key political challenges of our time?” (Bleiker 2019, 299).

This research project emerged out of my growing awareness of my own limits. I have been studying China for the past ten years, but my positionality both as a foreigner and as a researcher shapes how and what I see. Participatory photography made it possible for me to (partially) step outside of that positionality, enabling my participants to represent themselves and their own experience, while also protecting their identity. In the process, the paper makes space for voices rarely heard in discussions about the everyday life of security, or indeed in discussions about China.

Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available at the *International Political Sociology* data archive.

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