



**Roommate Relationships in Chinese University Dormitories:
Students' Life Experience and Perception**

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Abstract

The residential arrangement in which 4 to 6 students share one room during each year of their undergraduate studies presents a particular context in Chinese universities. How students manage these spaces and their relationships with each other are important to these young people's everyday lives, their friendships and tensions in higher education. However, this is not widely researched in higher education studies. The few existing Chinese studies on this type of relationship tend to focus on dorm conflicts, attributing these to students' lack of collectivistic and harmonious oriented awareness and social abilities. However, students' everyday interactions and relationship negotiations and their associations with the materialities of dorms and wider institutional and sociocultural contexts are often overlooked. Thus, I conducted a qualitative study to explore these questions, bringing together literature drawing on the debates of student's social relationships in higher education, relationality in personal life and materiality in domestic settings (particularly shared living) to examine the lived experiences of students living in Chinese dormitories. Alongside analysing 10 Chinese universities' digital platforms about their policies of student dormitories and roommates, I also interviewed 30 undergraduate and postgraduate Chinese university students, who also produced their dorm photographs of their dorms and emotion maps, depicting their living experiences in the shared dormitories. As revealed by the data, student dormitories are conceived and presented as rule-bound training sites for being 'good' citizens, students are expected to acquire competences like 'collective spirit' and a sense of group responsibility. Nevertheless, the thesis demonstrates that students' acquisition and practices of these competencies and their micro intimacies and conflicts in shared dorm living are more complex, multifaceted and unpredictable than assumed in existing literatures and, the ways they are shaped by universities' institutional environments as well as, the design and materials of the shared residential spaces are also multifaceted and unpredictable. The project thus broadens understanding of university roommate relationships in Chinese studies. It also builds dialogues among the sociological debates about higher education, relationality and materiality, extending these literatures by bringing them to bear on new global contexts.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Introduction

On an early autumn afternoon in 2010, my parents and I opened the door of my university dormitory. It was the first time I saw the place I was going to live all through my university study. My eyes alighted on a room with three bunk beds, two long desks and an attached balcony, which did not look very spacious. A girl was sitting on a bunk when we came in; she was one of my roommates - we said hello to each other with brief introductions. As a home student going to study in a Chinese university, I already knew that I would live in a communal space with other students as required by the university. However, I was still quite ambivalent when I entered my dormitory. On one hand, I was curious about my roommates; on the other, I was a little anxious, because I had been living with my parents and had my own bedroom for the past 18 years and had never experienced such residential living. 'You will start your collective living! Go ahead and get along with your roommates!', my parents said. 'Yes!' I responded in a relaxed tone, but asked myself secretly, 'Can I really handle this?'. I then began my adventure in this dormitory and a new way of living. I learned to deal with domestic issues and negotiate social relationships with those to whom I lived in close proximity every day.

During my time in this university accommodation, I gained a wide range of experiences and formed complex emotional and relationship bonds with my five roommates, including friendships, inspirations, tensions and pressure. I also saw and heard about other various kinds of interactions and relationships in other undergraduate dorms. For example, I often saw all the members of a neighbour dorm laughing and talking together not just in the dorm but also in many places on campus; I also saw some people who hugged their roommates and cried when they had to say goodbye at graduation; of course, there was also news of severe roommate conflicts that I heard about from chats, the Internet and the criminal cases I analysed in homework and exams as a Law student at that time. These stories and occasions always reminded me of my dormitory. Although my relationships with roommates were not that intimate or difficult, the similar but also multifarious living experiences in different dorms made me realise that this sort of 'collective living' may not be so simple and I started to become curious about how such various feelings and relationships manifested in this shared living environment. Several years later after I graduated from university, I went to the UK for sociological study, where I lived in a student apartment with single bedrooms, ensuite bathrooms and a shared kitchen. The clearly different physical and social environment I experienced evoked memories about my dorm living in China and brought

new aspects to my original thoughts. With the development of my study, these thoughts gradually grew into my project topic.

Considering the above experiences, my research explores the experiences of communal living in Chinese universities. In a context of an increasingly global and expanded student market, university residential provision and management has become an important aspect of university infrastructure. However, it is not often the focus of research attention - especially not in relation to personal life and social relations. Yet at the same time there has been increased interest in personal life (Smart, 2007) and friendships (e.g., Heaphy and Davies, 2011) and the objects which facilitate them in shared living arrangements as well as the design and nature of shared living spaces (e.g., Finn, 2015). Focusing on students' everyday life in shared university dormitories in China, my project brings these different spheres together to probe into both the social and spatial significance of university residences. In this thesis, I show how this exploration was conducted and its results. The chapter goes on to set out the sociological significance of researching everyday roommate relationships in Chinese universities before outlining the nature of the research and the structure of this thesis.

1.1 Research Problems and Importance

Governmental policies on university student residences

For many college students, leaving parents, living in a shared accommodation and negotiating the social relationships found there often form key life-course moments and an important part of their higher educational experience (Finn, 2015; Brooks and O'Shea, 2021). College residential experiences may even affect young people's life-course development in some respects, including lifestyles and friendships (Kenyon and Heath, 2001; Spencer and Pahl, 2006). In countries like the UK, university students' households are usually based in yearly blocks in university accommodation or privately rented residences and certain conditions involving the property and sharers can be flexible and selective for these young people (Heath and Cleaver, 2003). In contrast, Chinese home students, particularly undergraduates, are required to live in university dormitories during their college years - living off-campus can only be allowed for very special reasons and through a rigorous approval process, according to notices issued by the Ministry of Education (hereafter called MoE) of China (2004; 2007b; 2008) and the regulations it issues jointly with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Public Security of China (2000). Roommate allocation is also regulated by MoE of China (Ministry of Education of China, 1990; 2004; 2007b), which

states that dormitory assignments are determined by universities and students living in the same room being of the same gender and belonging to the same programme group in principle. Such special policies and designs of university student accommodations develop close ties among university students, their shared living and their higher educational institutions.

The uniqueness of Chinese university dormitories is also presented in their architectural design and rules on students' residential life. Different from flat or house sharing, the student dormitories of Chinese universities are usually a kind of bedroom sharing, because all the beds are usually placed in one room. As the MoE suggests in *Opinions on the Construction Standards of College Student Apartment* (Ministry of Education of China, 2001), a standard undergraduate dormitory should be a room shared by four people, with 8 m² per person; there is sometimes a balcony included in a dormitory room but spaces like bathrooms and toilets are usually shared. According to my participants' narratives and several universities' digital platforms I analysed, university dormitories with ensuite bathrooms are becoming more widespread, but the shared room including all the beds and sometimes also communal lockers and desks is still the common form in Chinese undergraduate dormitories. Like the accommodation arrangement, students' daily life in dormitories is also regulated by university (and government) policies in certain aspects, particularly the use of electricity or fire-related appliances, which are often required to be limited or prohibited (e.g., General Office of Ministry of Education of China, 2019). In this way, most dormitories do not usually include a kitchen space, or any cooking facilities.

Although empowering universities to make explicit rules and regulations to manage student dormitories (Ministry of Education of China, 2005), the regulations and other guidance issued by the governmental authorities reveal a relatively fixed and rule-bound general policy environment for these young people's residences during higher educational years. Such a context is partly underpinned by the consideration of students' personal and fire safety, as highlighted especially in the policies about mandatory university dorm residence and appliance restrictions (e.g., Ministry of Education of China, 2004; General Office of Ministry of Education of China, 2019). Meanwhile, cultivating students' awareness of cohesion and thrift is also a key notion supporting this policy framework, including the design of such simple and shared living space. Under the wider policy background, university undergraduate dormitories are not just places for students to settle in. More importantly, they are designed for ideological and quality-oriented education, which are regarded as necessary parts of higher education in China, from which students are expected to acquire a

series of moral and behavioural competencies, like the collectivistic spirit and characteristics of hard-working and frugality, to achieve well-rounded development (Ministry and Education of China, 2002; 2004). Engineering and managing student dormitories uniformly and fixedly is also a sort of guarantee of the equal residences among students with different economic statuses, as these accommodations are positioned as a kind of welfare which embody universities' responsibility to treat every student fairly (Ministry of Education of China, 2002; 2005). This guarantee is also reflected in governmental documents stressing the non-profit nature of university student dormitories and limiting and supervising universities' collection of fees (e.g., Ministry of Education of China, 2008).

Apart from fitting in such a highly shared space and navigating the rule-bound policy environment, negotiating roommate relationships is also an inevitable aspect for college dormitory residents. Governmental authorities do not directly offer policies or regulations on college roommate relationships, but they require universities to take responsibilities for the issues in students' residential life, like *"cultivating students' sense of collectivism"*, *"concern about students' thoughts and life and guiding them to properly deal with problems"* (e.g., Ministry of Education of China, 2004) and *"establishing and improving rules and regulations on student residence and the civilised constructions in students' dormitories"* (e.g., Ministry of Education of China, 2002; 2004; 2007b). These general requirements, as well as dormitories' educational effects highlighted by the government, are followed by universities and embodied in their various regulations and publicity around student dorm living, including social relationships.

As I discuss in detail in the next chapter, there is more than one type of higher educational institution (hereafter called HEIs) in the Chinese higher educational system. However, the HEIs my research focuses on, including those I analysed and those my participants come from, are public HEIs offering degree programmes which are mainstream in the Chinese HE system. Although there are slightly more higher vocational colleges than HEIs offering degree programmes in China, there are more students enrolled in HEIs offering degree programmes (18,931,044, compared with 16,030,263 in vocational colleges), according to statistics published by the MoE (Ministry of Education of China, 2022a). Moreover, there are differences between these two sorts of HEIs in terms of the orientation and approach of education and sometimes even campus culture (Yang, T., 2022; He, 2007). Meanwhile, as the mainstream HEI in the system, HEIs offering degree programmes generally have more well-established and representative operation and management systems in many aspects, including student residences, but the situation in vocational colleges is relatively more

complex and special (Zha, 2006; Lin, Li and He, 2023). For the coherence of the research, this thesis explores the student dormitories and roommate relationships in HEIs offering degree programmes - the situation in the context of vocational colleges can be researched in the future.

Public interest in college roommate relationships

Apart from governmental concerns and policies, there is also much public interest in university student residences, particularly in roommate relationships. University students' dorm living and social relationships have drawn attention in Chinese society to a great extent as a result of several reported murders or intentional assaults between college roommates. For instance, a male university student, Jiajue Ma, killed his roommates in 2004, which provoked a sensation around the country. The cause was attributed to accumulated tensions which triggered a quarrel when they were playing cards (Liang, 2008; Findlaw.cn, 2012). News and comments about these cases were reported and presented through the media, which then made this kind of shared living and social relationships a frequent topic of public debate. There are various viewpoints on media, analysing the reasons of these crimes or how conflicts are formed and become attacks, which have evolved into concerns and discussions among the public about university dorm tensions and extended themes like college students' personalities, mental health, social skills or abilities to engage in collective living (for example, Yang and Liu, 2013; Zhao, 2013). Most commentaries about university dorm conflicts from the media, particularly the mainstream media, tend to indicate these young people's failures in forging group consciousness and solid interpersonal relationships in collective living, based on governmental policies about the educational significance of university dormitories and their social and moral expectations of students (e.g., Yanzhao Metropolis Daily, 2013; Guo, 2013). This orientation is also reflected in their publicity of news showing the friendships or care between university roommates, *like Good roommate in China! Student returning late slept overnight on the corridor of the building to avoid disturbing his sleeping roommates* (Li, 2017a) published on China Youth Net and a widespread story about a student who saved the important possessions of the whole dormitory from an earthquake (e.g., Liu and Zhao, 2013). Thus, it seems that the public and media often act as the messengers and explainers of governmental policies in commenting on university roommate relationships.

In addition to news media reports and reviews, a huge number of debates circulate online and on social media. There are various personal experiences and sentiments displayed in

the comment sections of relevant news reports or media articles, but more frequently on public discussion platforms like the Bulletin Board System of some websites or social media. These online reflections and exchanges demonstrate a wide range of stories, perceptions or emotions, like the affections, complaints or hatred of roommates, feelings about this highly shared life or evaluations of dormitory-related policies or rules (e.g., Clematis, 2019; Guimuzhi, 2018). With the development of virtual discussions, there have even emerged some hotspots and buzzwords; although whether these online comments are authentic needs to be further verified, these voices reveal the multifaceted and emotional aspects of university dorm living and roommate relationships, compared with the official policies and dominant displays in the public media. Meanwhile, netizens' personal thinking about this collective living and relevant regulations reflects that there may be various practical effects of such an officially conceived residential system in students' mundane life, which may not always be the same as expected by the authorities or presented in public media.

The public discussion of Chinese university roommate relationships has thus made this kind of personal relationship a controversial social topic in China. How they are shown and thought about by netizens indicates that negotiating these relationships in practical university dorm living may be complex experiences but seem to be taken for granted by official assumptions and expectations. Thus, to construct more coherent understandings of Chinese university dormitories and roommate relationships, including related practices of official and macro policies and regulations, it is important to understand the lived experiences and everyday realities of shared living in these residences from the perspectives of students themselves. To generate these responses, I conducted an empirical study focusing on young people's everyday dorm living and their social and emotional experiences during this process.

Academic research on Chinese university roommate relationships

There have been several studies investigating university roommate relationships in China and explaining the tensions in college dormitories is a core theme for most of them. While these are discussed in Chapter 2, it is worth noting that some studies indicate various personal differences that can cause dorm tensions; other researchers observe the competition between college roommates who not only live together but also have the same study tasks, due to the roommate assignment policy (e.g., Zhu and Zhu, 2011; Wang and Wang, 2014). Some researchers further link these explanations to discussions about wider topics like the growth of these young generations, the diversity of university students or the

psychological analysis of personal relationships (e.g., Li, H., 2006; Sun, 2014; Xu *et al.*, 2016). However, most highlight that students should create togetherness in dorm living and thus attribute conflicts to young people's lack of interpersonal abilities and group spirit or collective awareness (e.g., Liang, 2008; Huang and Guo, 2016), continuing the core assumptions and notions of governmental documents and mainstream media commentaries. Thus, although offering some insights, the dominant arguments of existing Chinese research mainly reflect and reinforce official stances. There seems to be a lack of deep focus on students' personal experience and perceptions in mundane dorm living. It is important to understand how the spatial design and university-made residential rules (the embodiment of governmental policies on college residential life) are experienced by students in their everyday lives and relationships. However, how college roommate relationships are shaped by the dorm spaces and university dorm rules have received little scholarly attention.

The importance of collective living and students' collective consciousness highlighted by governmental authorities, public media and most studies also illustrate a collectivistic orientation. This is often defined as a notion prioritising collective cohesion and benefits and is often thought to be a key feature of Chinese culture (Nelson and Chen, 2007; Nelson *et al.*, 2012). However, there are also arguments demonstrating how the collectivistic oriented culture in China is defined, especially how it is practised, may be contextual or relational rather than being simple or fixed (e.g., Triandis *et al.*, 1990; Liu, 2010; Yang, 2018). In this sense, how this cultural context influences collective dorm living in practices, particularly how the importance of being collective highlighted by the official standpoints are practised by students, also need to be explored to understand young people's collective dorm living from their perspectives.

1.2 Research Focus and Questions

Given these various contexts, my research aims to reflect on a more multidimensional and dynamic picture of young people's dorm living and discuss their roommate relationships beyond the currently dominant but seemingly taken for granted lens and assumptions. To broaden the gaze and deepen the understandings of students' living experiences, I critically draw on sociological debates about people's college experience and how it is impacted by mass higher education, the relationality of personal life and relationships including friendships, the relationships negotiated in shared living and the materiality of social relationships, especially in a domestic setting. Conceptually underpinned by the relational approach, which associates personal relationship and emotional experience with the wider context and focuses on a multifaceted and fluid lens (e.g., Smart, 2007; Finn, 2015), my

research shows how contexts such as HE are deeply relational experiences which are fluid and embodied, emotional and sensorial. My research also applies ideas like critical friendships (e.g., Heaphy and Davies, 2012), home making in shared living (e.g., Heath, *et al.*, 2017), and a spatial and material-oriented perspective on social relationships (Finn, 2015; Woodward, 2020). The idea of critical friendships highlights the ups and downs of friendships as important but not always positively experienced; the notion of home making emphasises a sense of practice and home skills in shared living; and the spatiality and materiality of social relationships stresses the bonds between personal relationships and people's relations with things and spaces. These applications help me to probe and reveal the complexity of university dorm living and roommate relationships in real life. My research also sets up a dialogue among these relationality debates and studies of Chinese college student dormitories. Bringing together debates generated both from China and the Global North applies the concepts of relationality to a new context, which offers a different perspective to the understandings of students' residence and social relationships in higher education, household sharing and the relevant material culture.

Supported by the theoretical stances above, my research explores students' everyday social and emotional negotiating experiences in Chinese university dormitories and their interplay with the institutional context and material residential environment. These explorations are based on three research questions:

1. In what ways do Chinese university student residential policies conceive and present shared living and social relationships in student dormitories?
2. How do young people manage and negotiate their social relationships and interactions in shared living spaces?
3. How are these social relationships and interactions shaped by the materialities and design of shared living space?

The first question intends to explore how Chinese universities provide, present and regulate students' shared dormitories and roommate relationships in detail, under the governmental policies and sociocultural context mentioned above. This question is also established to illustrate the explicit institutional context of college students' dorm living. The second question turns to participants' everyday dorm living and relationship negotiations in practice, including their possible associations or differences from the requirements or expectations of universities (as reflected in the first question). The third question aims to explore young

people's social relationships in dorm living from a spatial or material perspective to understand how the unique layout of Chinese dorm rooms impacts students' social relationships and living experiences. These three questions focus on distinct aspects of student residential policy, the lived experience of roommate relationships in Chinese university dormitories, and the ways in which the materialities of things and spaces shape and influence social relationships in the dorms.

Outline of research design and methods approach

Underpinned by these objectives, conceptual framework and research questions, I designed and conducted qualitative research constituted by document analysis, visual methods and online semi-structured interviews. To reflect on the complexity, fluidity and spatiality of Chinese university roommate relationships, I aimed to conduct relational, emotional, dynamic and material explorations on students' interactions and relationship negotiations in everyday dorm living and their associations with the shared material dorm space and the rule-bound institutional context. In this sense, a qualitative approach is significant, due to its multidimensional, flexible and contextual focus on personal thinking and experiences (Manning and Kunkel, 2014; Bryman, 1988). Moreover, there is a dominant number of quantitative or psychology-based studies in existing research on Chinese college roommate relationships, rather than socially located explanations. In contrast, a qualitative lens is helpful for me to probe into these personal relationships in micro and relational aspects, revealing the often taken for granted complexity and meanings of roommate relationships to young people in their everyday lives (Silverman, 2013).

I conducted document analysis of ten Chinese universities' websites and publicly available residential policy documents. The ten universities ranged from elite to non-elite universities. Using this method, I analysed student dormitory-related regulations and publicity on the universities' official websites and other digital platforms. These analyses helped me to explore how they conceive of and present students' shared dorm living and roommate relationships, which is the focus of the first research question.

I also conducted semi-structured interviews, for which I recruited 30 participants who are experiencing or have experienced dorm living in Chinese universities, including both current (by the time of interviews) undergraduates as well as graduate Chinese college students. In the interviews, participants were invited to talk about their personal experiences and feelings about their dorm living and roommate relationship negotiations. I incorporated a range of visual methods into the interviews, including photography and emotion maps (Gabb, 2008)

offered by participants about their dormitories, to assess the complexities of emotional personal life more effectively, objects and everyday spaces (Woodward, 2020). The interviews and visual methods helped me explore the social and spatial aspects of the young people's shared dorm living, which answered the second and third research questions. The visual datasets were not just applied as elicitation in the follow-up interviews but were also independent datasets for analysis. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdown, the fieldwork was conducted online through communication software. The fieldwork was conducted in Mandarin and the textual data were then translated into English in the analysis process. The data were analysed through a thematic approach, with the assistance of NVivo software.

This thesis is organised into seven chapters, explicitly displaying the main rationales, process and findings of this research. These chapters are detailed below.

1.3 Thesis Structure

This is the first and introductory chapter of the thesis. Following this, Chapter 2 outlines the context of student accommodation in Chinese universities. It combines background information about Chinese HE systems with academic and media literature pertaining to Chinese university student experiences. This is also where the findings from the document analysis of university digital platforms are discussed. The chapter adds to the understanding of how these students' residential arrangements and everyday residential life are managed and regulated by governmental and university authorities, how they are often thought of in the sociocultural environment and researched by scholars. The chapter offers context and insights to inform and frame the wider thesis and reflects that Chinese universities, public media and most academic research demonstrate consistency with governmental policies and notions, regarding students' shared dorm living and roommate relationship management as both a kind of compulsory HE training and a type of home sharing for students. Influenced by these rationales, the dominant academic discussions on college roommate relationships, particularly conflicts in China, tend to be static and fixed. Against this background, college students' shared residence and dorm living are rule-bound with competencies like being collectivistic and solid, caring for each other and forming togetherness.

Chapter 3 offers a comparative literature review relating to the project. This chapter discusses the current academic debates drawing on literature in both China and the Global North (mainly the UK) and it also presents the conceptual framework which supports the rationale of my research. Based on a critical overview of the literature, it illustrates the

significance of certain notions to my research and knowledge gaps which can be filled through my project. This chapter focuses on the academic fields of higher education, relationality and materiality, upon which the theoretical stances of my research are grounded. The overview of the literature of higher education studies focuses on changes in HE, revealing the implications of these changes on students' higher educational experience in China and the Global North. This section reflects on the debates generated through the lens of social (in)equality, which has become a key perspective of the sociology of HE and even affects the research of college roommate relationships. The review of relationality approach focuses on the influences of a relational approach on the research of personal life and relationships. The relational approach is also applied in the sociology of friendships and shared living; how this notion is applied and how these concepts can be further linked to the context of student residence in Chinese higher education will be discussed in this chapter. The discussion of materiality will reflect on the connections between the approaches of materiality and relationality in understanding students' residential life in HE settings, focusing on the application of a space or objects related approach to the explorations of social relationships in students' shared dorm living in Chinese universities. Based on the literature review, I demonstrate the significance of the relational, dynamic and spatial lens to my research to offer a flexible and multifaceted understanding of students' HE experiences in shared living and roommate relationships in a Chinese HE context.

Chapter 4 provides a methodological overview of how the empirical work of my project is designed and conducted and how the data are analysed. This chapter explains why and how I applied a qualitative approach to my research. It also gives an overall summary of research design and methods, which reflects on the sampling and recruitment and an overview of participants' key demographic information. It discusses the document analysis, visual methods (photography and emotion maps) and interviews which I specially applied to collect data. This chapter also overviews the data management approach, including the transcription and translation of the data and then how the data were coded and analysed thematically. There are also examinations of the ethical issues and strategies I used in the fieldwork. In this chapter I also outline my reflexivity and positionality, reflecting on how my data collection and analysis were influenced or challenged by issues like my personal biography, working in a pandemic and dealing with a large amount of qualitative data.

Chapter 5 and 6 are empirical chapters discussing the research findings that emerged through the interviews and visual methods. Chapter 5 focuses on friendships, tensions or conflicts, accommodations and social skills that make up different and often fragile

interactions and negotiations of social relationships in university dormitories. The chapter argues that negotiating roommate relationships in Chinese university dormitories can be fluid and ambivalent; this is a process within which there can be multifaceted emotional and relationship experiences but also a range of social and emotional competences developed by the young people in person. Moreover, the findings also reveal the paradoxical roles played by university residential rules in these college roommates' friendship building and tension management. The discussion in this chapter reflects on how these young people form and develop relationships through various practices in their dorm living. It also reveals how these college roommates manage dorm tensions, particularly why and how some of them become 'socially smart' to deal with irritative issues. There are also reflections on how navigating university residential rules can affect roommate relationships in this chapter.

Chapter 6 focuses on the associations between young people's roommate relationship negotiations and the material spaces or objects of their dorms. This is also the main chapter where the photos and emotion maps generated by participants are presented and discussed. In general, this chapter reflects the importance of material things for these young people to retreat from communal living but also to facilitate proximity and solidarity with roommates. This chapter also reveals how setting up physical public-private boundaries in this highly shared living environment is significant to roommate relationship negotiations. This chapter discusses how these young people organised their personal bunk/loft-bed areas as personal spaces. It also focuses on the balcony, which can be an extended personal space for retreat but also an extra social space involving more roommate interactions or even shared moments. It also demonstrates college roommates' sharing of the communal space in dorm living and its associations with relationship negotiations.

Chapter 7 presents the conclusion of this thesis. It offers a final summary of the core findings of this research, categorised by research question. It outlines the key contributions made by this project to the sociology of higher education, shared living and materiality and its policy and management implications, by referring to Chapters 2 and 3 and discussing how my findings helped develop certain debates in these fields and might impact the making and implementation of college student residency policies in China. It also reflects on research methods, reviewing the process of the empirical work including both the development and challenges and reflexive and positional issues. There is also an indication of the limitations of this research and suggestions for future work in this chapter.

Following this introductory chapter, the thesis details and analyses higher education changes, university student residential policies and existing college roommate relationship studies in the Chinese context.

Chapter 2 Research Background and University Roommate Relationship Studies in the Chinese Context

Introduction

This chapter reviews existing Chinese literature about college roommate relationships. It also sets out the policy and sociocultural context of the research, drawing on policy documents, media reports and commentaries and university digital platforms. Student dormitories in Chinese universities not only have a distinctive structure but they also have a particular policy and sociocultural context. The policy and sociocultural backgrounds of Chinese university dormitories also influence the research on college roommate relationships in China. By introducing and discussing these contexts, this chapter reflects in depth on Chinese university dormitories and roommate relationships, revealing the regulation and sociocultural environment under which these young people live together and negotiate roommate relationships. This chapter provides an overview of Chinese university dormitories and roommate relationships, exploring relevant policies and debates from the government, public media, universities and Chinese scholars to understand the context of this social issue and the sociological significance of the research.

This chapter is divided into six sections. The first section reviews the current Chinese research on university roommate relationships and goes on to reflect on the high level of public interest in university student residential arrangements and students' roommate relationships. The third part explores the sociocultural context of these current studies and public discussions of Chinese university dormitories and roommate relationships, focusing on the collectivistic oriented cultural background and the 'only-child' policy in China. The fourth section provides an overview of the higher education system in China. The fifth section discusses key governmental policies and regulations in relation to Chinese university student accommodation. The final section reviews ten university online platforms and related documents to examine how student dormitories and roommate relationships are presented and portrayed in the rules and public announcements of specific universities.

2.1 Literature Review: College Roommate Relationship Research in China

In China, college roommate relationships are a focus of research investigation as well as a subject of wider interest in campus life, students' well-being in universities and the development of higher education (HE). From the existing literature, it can be found that the

key theme of college roommate relationships research in China are conflicts between roommates, and researchers are particularly interested in the tension between roommates with different lifestyles and values due to different backgrounds. According to Sun (2014), different regional culture and family economic status may cause gaps among students in terms of their habits and forms of consumption, which may lead to disagreement in their daily life that triggers conflicts. Furthermore, in research by Zhu and Zhu (2011), the differences between people are even regarded as the root cause of tension in college roommate relationships. The two researchers also asserted that roommate conflicts involving lifestyles such as eating habits and bedtimes have shown an increasing trend in recent years, especially among new college students, due to the expansion of university admission into more provinces (Zhu and Zhu, 2011). Liang (2008) added that students who grew up in different environments may also have different perceptions of issues such as time management, the use of shared space and dormitory cleaning. The distinctions of lifestyles and values caused by a variety of personal backgrounds are widely thought to be the key drivers of roommate conflicts. This focus on social differences also reflects the growing diversity of college roommates which has resulted from increasing access to HE. Zhu and Zhu (2011) argue that these distinctions can be seen as an embodiment of the HE massification in students' residential life.

In addition, researchers such as Wang and Wang (2014) have observed the potential competitions among college roommates in relation to studying as a source of tension. This is because most Chinese college roommates also belong to the same programme group, or at least the same department (see Chapter 1). Some researchers focus on the correlations between gender and roommate relationships. Huang and Guo (2016) found that the tension between women roommates may be more likely than between men, because women are more sensitive to others' behaviours and words. However, while Sun (2014) found that women students are more likely to maintain harmonious roommate relationships, Zhang (2019) asserted that the conflicts between female roommates could be attributed to personal differences, competition and ineffective communication, but there is little difference between these reasons and those based on investigations of both men and women students. These three arguments seem to be contradictory: the relationships could be more productively explored from a relational and dynamic perspective which connects various social and emotional dynamics and interactions, like personal difference, identities, conflicts, and spatial and temporal conditions.

The above arguments reflect multiple causes of roommate conflicts. However, these causes are often discussed in the existing literature through individualistic and psychological

accounts, rather than socially located accounts. According to Liang (2008), young people overemphasise their individuality and personal benefits but ignore collective interests, and some may even sabotage their roommates when facing competition. Liang further explained that undergraduates are not mature enough and have not completely formed a sense of collectivism. Furthermore, Huang and Guo (2016) also mentioned that students usually lack communication skills, due to their overly smooth process of growth, so they are often too naive and sentimental to manage interpersonal relationships, sometimes they may even intensify divergence and then cause more misunderstandings and conflicts. As shown above, many scholars also mention the 'only-child' issue in their discussions, which is a special Chinese population policy I explain in detail in section 2.3. In a study by Shen (2008), for instance, the causes of dormitory tensions are summed up as the weakness of personality of the 'only-child'. In research by Wang and colleagues (Wang, Dong and Feng, 2017), the selfishness and irresponsibility of students are related to a lack of experience of living with siblings. According to Li, H. (2006), these 'only-children' are spoiled by parents so that they cultivate a sense of superiority which makes them selfish and sensitive; as a result, they tend to require others to compromise with them instead of making any change for others, particularly when disagreements arise. It is clear that college students are widely problematized in the existing Chinese literature about roommate conflicts. However, such arguments are often based on a lack of coherent data or theoretical analysis. In other words, some of these arguments seem judgemental and are mentioned as if they are common sense, for example: *"in real life, many college students are the 'only-child' of the family who have always been the centre of their family and have got much concern. Consequently, they have had an excessive sense of superiority which makes them feel that they should still be the centre even in the university."* (Li, H., 2006, p. 110)

This argument can also be found in other literature about college roommate relationships in China, for example, Huang and Guo (2016, p. 28) note that college students are *"mentally immature in general"* and *"cannot control their emotions well when facing dispute"*. It seems that researchers in this field have reached a consensus about the relations between the 'weaknesses' of young people, especially 'only-children', and roommate tensions.

Although these studies are based on a variety of methods, their framing and results are strikingly similar. Almost all the research was conducted with the assumption that roommate relationships should be collective and harmonious, and these appropriate relationships can only be built and maintained when roommates hold a sense of collectivism and selflessness which make them care about each other and emerge in active and effective communications. Based on this assumption, these researchers take for granted that the tension or other

disharmonious phenomena in dormitory living must result from students' problematic interactions like misunderstandings or failed communications - these failings are attributed to students' shortcomings, lacking the awareness of collectivism and solidarity, and in some research such weakness is said to date back to the time before college. These studies highlight the importance of collectivism and mutual care in roommate relationships and dormitory living, but there seems to be less empirical evidence in these studies to prove the direct link between the tension and the lack of cohesion. For example, Xianyu (2016, p. 78) argues that "*this student is self-centred and in a lack of cohesion, he did not care about others' feelings and thus did not accept roommates' advice or habits, which eventually caused the tension*". This student-blaming approach can be regularly found in the analyses of roommate conflicts in the existing literature, but few researchers further explain whether or how disagreement or incompatibility between students is influenced by 'self-centred' thoughts.

Collectivism is also frequently stressed in strategies. In the existing literature, although there are various solutions ranging from conflict mediation (Shi, 2017) to psychological counselling, lectures or after-class activities aiming at relationship improvement and guidance (Wang and Wang, 2014; Xu *et al.*, 2016), almost all these ultimately concentrate on maintaining the dormitory harmony and cultivating a sense of collectivism in students' mind. In research by Li, H. (2006), cultivating a sense of cohesion is mentioned as a crucial way to form harmonious roommate relationships, "*a student should actively take the burden of the 'public issues' like cleaning the public spaces in the dormitory, besides, the student should care more about others rather than himself. Only in this way, the student can gain affections from other roommates...and they would gradually form a harmonious relationship.*" (Li, H., 2006, p. 111). However, Li, H. (2006) does not offer evidence that his solution is the only way to rise affections, nor does he prove the inevitability of the causality among cohesion, affection and harmonious roommate relationships.

Again, the rationales of solutions in Chinese literature are underpinned by the collectivistic oriented assumption. In the existing Chinese literature, it seems that no matter the harmonious atmosphere or the intimate interrelationships are more like an expectation or requirement which may not represent real situations. These can be seen in the judgemental narratives of researchers, the frequent use of words like 'should', and a lack of relevant evidence to prove their arguments. More importantly, although the cases of roommate conflicts shown in different literature are distinctive, all these tensions are analysed through a collectivistic rationale which is oversimplified and taken out of context. In addition, these arguments echo and are consistent with the viewpoints of most mainstream media,

universities and governmental authorities in China, as I observe in the following sections, it seems that existing Chinese research only reflects the discourse of the providers of HE, including universities and the government. Under this discourse, although most researchers have collected quantitative or qualitative data from students and show these data in the literature, the results all point to students' 'problems'. However, these opinions, which emerge from an abstract and static understanding of student dorm living, may not represent students' own perceptions in practice. Moreover, it also seems to be insufficient to explain or judge students' living experiences just according to the expectations of their teachers and universities.

Therefore, to give an insight into roommate relationships from a more comprehensive and dialectic way, research from students' perspectives is needed to reflect how they negotiate roommate relationships and feel about their roommates in practice. By focusing on students' everyday life and their own perceptions, complex and dynamic aspects of roommate relationships and more types of living experience gained by college students could be found.

Furthermore, in some Chinese literature, the direct or objective reasons for roommate conflicts, like using public stuff and dormitory cleaning (Liang, 2008), involve the material environment of dormitories - this is also a unique context of Chinese college student residence. However, Chinese researchers tend to focus more on the relation between the tension and students' lack of solidarity, rather than physical spaces or objects. In most cases, the architectural structure or the furnishing of the dorm is just background information if it is mentioned in the literature. For example, the spatial communality mentioned in Gao's (2013) paper is just used to introduce that students with different lifestyles living together can encounter conflicts, but no further discussion appears to explain the associations among this kind of spatial communality, social relationships and diversified lifestyles in shared dorm living. Thus, the materials in the dorm which are also closely associated with these young people's shared living need to be explored. As discussed above, many arguments in this existing literature, especially explanations which straightforwardly link college roommate relationships to students' lack of competencies to form solidarity, align with mainstream opinions of the public media in China. Thus, it is important to explore the media context and public discussions of Chinese university dormitories and roommate relationships.

2.2 University Dormitories and Roommate Relationships and Chinese Media

Media interest and attitudes

How college students live together in a shared environment and how they negotiate their relationships attracts much concern from the public media, mainly due to several high-profile crimes among college roommates caused by dormitory tensions in recent decades. For example, in 2004, male student Jiajue Ma was reported to have killed his roommates after a quarrel with them while playing cards together (Findlaw, 2012). In 2009, male student Liwei Guo was reported to have killed his roommate after a series of conflicts following a failed joke between them (Gan, 2010). In 2020, a female student was reported to have stabbed two of her roommates, who always had tensions with her, on graduation day (Wu, Xie and Chen, 2020). Most of these crimes were reported as the results of simmering conflicts or animosity between roommates, which closely involved students' safety and well-being in higher education. Thus, they caused a stir in the media and then the wider Chinese society. Many media outlets not only reported these cases, but also made special analyses of them. Media reports and articles present more details about how and why these tragedies happened, revealing that most were caused not just by a single source of tension. For instance, the case of Jiajue Ma involves issues including his personality and communication between roommates (Du, 2004); while Liwei Guo's case is not only connected with a joke between roommates and changed friendships, but also involves noise in the dorm caused by roommates at night (Gan, 2010). Some media analysed the crimes and related conflicts in the dorm from the perspective of students' mental problems and called for more attention on students' mental health (Jiangsu Higher Education Network, 2013; Zhao, 2013).

Social surveys have been organised by some media to explore university roommate relationships. For example, in 2017, a survey with 958 Chinese college students was organised by China Youth Network, investigating the frequency, reasons and strategies for roommate conflict in Chinese universities (Li, 2017b). As reflected in the results of this survey, nearly half of the sample students had conflicts with roommates, with different lifestyles, personalities and hobbies and improper words being the main reasons for tension; mutual respects, help and being tolerant about petty things in mundane life were identified as important for roommate relationship negotiation (Li, 2017b). However, the analyses and comments of most media seem to reach a consensus that just attributes these dormitory conflicts to students' problematic approach to relationship management and their lack of a sense of solidarity in collective living. A report of *Yanzhao Metropolis Daily* (2013) referred to two university staff members' opinions, regarding students' selfishness, arrogance, and lack of team spirit and consideration for others as the key reasons for dorm tensions. It then listed tips for how to be tolerant, caring, communicative and understandable in dormitory interactions to get along with roommates (Yanzhao Metropolis Daily, 2013). Some media also connect these supposed failings to students' identity as the 'only-children of the family'

who are spoiled and are thus self-centred, 'know less about tolerance or humility' and 'seldom communicate with each other' (see Liang, 2010; Hui, 2013).

As mentioned in a commentary by *China Youth Daily* (Hui, 2013), increasing conflicts between roommates reveal students' lack of abilities in terms of shared living and even low emotional quotient in social interactions, which would be harmful for their future well-being in society, particularly in their relationships with others like family and colleagues. Similar comments were also presented in an article of *People's Daily* (Guo, 2013), with the title emphasising that roommate relationship negotiation is another compulsory course in the university and even the students' life course. As shown by the viewpoints above, most public media regard college roommate relationships as a part of interpersonal rather than residential issues and focus much more on students' social skills and collective spirit when explaining dorm conflicts. According to this view, negotiating roommate relationships is necessary training in socialisation for students at university, from which they are expected to learn how to interact and build relationships with others and improve their social abilities and moral character, including the group spirit. In this sense, the tensions and crimes in the dorm are thought to pose difficulties or failure in training. These ideas reflect the importance of moral and social education to Chinese HE. They also reveal the close connections between these essential educational issues and students' shared living and relationship negotiations in university dorms. These are fundamentally in line with governmental attitudes towards college roommate relationships and are also understood by most Chinese universities, which I discuss in detail in the following sections. Thus, these dormitory-related topics and social events often receive a high level of media interest because of the close ties between students' roommate relationships and the important educational or training objectives of Chinese HE, in addition to a range of high-profile incidents.

Apart from the unsatisfactory process or results, there have been reports of successful cases in this relationship negotiation training in the dorm. For example, as widely reported by public media, in the Ya'an earthquake in 2013, a second-year male student majoring in radio and TV directing saved all the six laptops and three SLR cameras, which included not only his but also his five roommates' important personal possessions, as he knew that these belongings were not only expensive but also essential to their work (Liu and Zhao, 2013). Although his somewhat adventurous behaviour caused some debate, based on reports and netizens' comments, many people were moved by his kindness and the words "*these are all based on the friendship we have been building for two years*" he said in an interview, he was thus named by the media and the public as 'a good Chinese roommate' (for example Cheng, 2013). Similar stories have been reported by other public media, like the story with the title

Good roommate in China! Student returning late slept overnight in the corridor of the building to avoid disturbing his sleeping roommates (Li, 2017a) published on China Youth Net.

Although such propaganda is less common as articles about roommate conflicts, they also reveal a kind of consistency with the policies or stances of the government or universities. Both the titles and underlined content highlight that caring and helping each other are appropriate and recommended forms of interactions and relationship management in dorm living.

In general, media reports, publicity and analysis reflect a united front by Chinese public media on social relationships in university dormitories, emphasising the collective and solidarity-prioritised university dorm living and using these patterns to evaluate dorm tensions. However, more various voices about university dorm living and roommate relationships have emerged online, showing more complex situations in this kind of shared residence.

Netizens' reflections on dorm living experiences

With the development of the Internet, there have been a growing number of perceptions from netizens about college roommate relationships in China. Some are comments on the relevant media articles, but more are present in specific public discussion platforms like the Bulletin Board Systems set up by some websites or social media. Netizens express various viewpoints: some advocate or question dorm-related policies, some reflect admiration and envy about 'successful' cases of dorm living, others present affection for their roommates, and there are also quite a lot of complaints about roommates. For example, some netizens observe that universities should let students choose their roommates themselves to avoid conflicts and they approve of some universities' reforms on this issue, but some people assert that roommate selection may not necessarily work as the chosen roommates may not be as good as imagined (China Youth Online, 2018). Many netizens also discussed topics about dormitory policies or roommate relationships in online forums, with topics such as *What lessons did your college roommates teach you?* Various opinions and personal experiences are generated in these discussions, including both affection and negative feelings about roommates (e.g., Clematis, 2019). There are also perceptions on the highly shared life or evaluations of dormitory-related policies or rules (e.g., Guimuzhi, 2018).

Influenced by the development of these online discussions and the shocking dormitory crimes reported by the media, some buzzwords have emerged and are circulated on the

Internet - like *'thanks to my roommates for not killing me'* - which are used to describe the harmonious roommate relationship or in more cases relationships that are not that intimate but are fortunately not hostile. Although the authenticity of these online comments and discussions remains to be seen, the voices of netizens and the university roommate relationships they discuss seem to present a more diversified picture, which is not always the same as that presented by the public media.

In terms of university student dormitories and roommate relationships, the public media, especially the mainstream media, are often more like the messengers and explainers for governmental policies - particularly to college students. How these young people live together and negotiate roommate relationships is partly reflected in the public media. However, as revealed by netizens' discussions, how the closeness and tensions emerge and develop in their mundane living does not seem so simple, fixed or ideal. Thus, in this sense, it is significant to explore college students' personal experiences of everyday life and relationship negotiations in practice to investigate how they are associated with the policy and public opinion contexts mentioned above.

There is much media interest in and public attention on how students must live while at university. In the above public notions about university student dormitories and social relationships, concepts like collective priority and 'only-children' involve a special Chinese sociocultural context that is introduced in the next section.

2.3 Sociocultural Context: Collectivistic Oriented Culture and the 'One Child' policy

The collectivistic oriented culture and its debates

Collectivism, which supports the design of Chinese university dormitories and relevant research, is generally thought to be a value dating back to ancient Confucian times and passed down to modern China, according to which individuals must suppress their emotions and desires for the sake of group benefit and harmony (Nelson and Chen, 2007; Nelson *et al.*, 2012), although such groups in ancient China were mainly constructed on the basis of kinship. Nowadays, this sense of cohesion has extended to non-kin communities. Under the homogenous cultural context in modern China, stressing social communality and harmony, students in a dormitory are encouraged to take care of each other and work together to progress in study and life. This may explain why solidarity and sharing are often stressed by researchers and HE providers in China and that the lack of collective consciousness is often considered a serious problem that students should rectify (Huang and Guo, 2015).

Through dormitory living, Chinese undergraduates are expected to cultivate a sense of belonging and obligation to the community and form intimacy with their roommates. However, in research by Triandis, McCusker and Hui (1990), the performance of collectivism and individualism in reality was shown to be context dependent. Furthermore, Yang (2015) mentions that the effect of the two values on Chinese people's daily life seem to be variable. These arguments are all underpinned by the real core of Chinese collectivist culture which does not simply mean that people like staying together. According to Yang (2018), Chinese social and moral culture, whether in the past or now, tends to be relation-oriented rather than simply collectively oriented, focusing more on forming, maintaining and ordering relationships (*guanxi* in Chinese) with other individuals and considering the *face* (or *mianzi/lianmian* in Chinese, similar to dignity or honour in English) of self and others when managing relationships.

Due to these orientations, Chinese are more likely to interact and communicate with others in a harmonious and restrained way and usually dislike direct opposition or antagonism when conflicts happen (Chen, 2010; Huang, L.-L., 2016). This relationship and harmony-centred philosophy is presented not only in interpersonal interactions, but also in the relation between individuals and the group. As argued by Wang and Liu (2010), the group and individual in Chinese culture are actually not opposite but compatible and Confucian philosophy cultivates both the collective and individual values. As suggested by Huang and colleagues (Huang *et al.*, 2018), Chinese culture has never ignored personal agency - taking social responsibility does not mean removing individual agency. Other researchers also find features of utilitarianism and circumstance orientation in Chinese culture (e.g., Walker and Moran, 1991), which means that practical situations play important roles in people's management of affairs.

As asserted by Peng (2020), traditional Chinese culture values include balance, inclusiveness and practice and are inherited and embedded into the ideology of modern socialist China. In this sense, Chinese culture should be understood and explored in a practical and dynamic way. Meanwhile, people's experiences and behaviours under this cultural context can be presented and explained in more diversified and multifaceted ways than as a fixed pattern. Thus, in terms of university dorm living in the Chinese HE environment, there also seems to be a need for an open and practical perspective to reflect on how students manage their roommate relationships under a context that emphasises collectivism and harmony. Beyond the dualistic 'collectivistic or not' gaze, there should be observations on how these young people's shared living and relationship negotiations are

influenced by this cultural context and how they understand and navigate it in their everyday dorm practices.

People's perceptions of 'only-child' generations

As mentioned above, until recently many home students of Chinese HEIs have been part of the 'only-child' generation. This is due to a special population policy in China called 'family-planning policy' or the 'one-child policy' which was officially in place from 1982 until 2016. According to this policy, a Chinese couple without special circumstances, like belonging to a rural household or minority ethnic groups, should have only one child (Wang and Hu, 2012). This policy influenced several generations of Chinese university students, most of whom usually had no experience of living with siblings when growing up. They are often called 'the only-child of the family' by the public media or in academic research, and regularly linked by the media, policymakers and researchers to problems of personality or interpersonal skills – they have been used to explain students' dormitory conflicts in literature focusing on university roommate relationships (e.g., Zhao, 2021; Wang and Liu, 2015; Wang and Wang, 2014; Xiao, 2013). There is also a connection between these arguments and mainstream collectivistic-oriented social notions. According to research by Nelson, Badger and Wu (2004), with the influence of collectivistic culture and social norms, some criteria of adulthood are widely highlighted and influential in Chinese society even to young people themselves, including emotion control, being less self-oriented and considering others. As I examined in previous sections, some of these criteria are also the competencies which college students are expected to acquire from shared dorm living. Under these criteria, young people who cannot reach these standards tend to be thought of as immature or problematic and the 'only-child' is likely to be thought of this way in particular (see Huang and Guo, 2016; Shen, 2008).

According to Fong (2004), in contrast with older generations, most of the 'only-children' in China gain better living and education resources and investment from the family, but much is thus expected of them by elder generations in various aspects and they would be directly suspected of being incompetent or spoiled if they did not achieve them. However, Fong (2004) argues that being spoiled may be just a relative concept emerging from the comparison between the life of the 'only-child' and their parents, but this may not be the case when they are compared with those living in another sociocultural context - it may be normal in the process of modernity. Based on Fong's observations, the characteristics of the 'only-child' and their behaviours and thinking in practice cannot be taken for granted. Moreover, Fan and Yu (2019) mentioned that although some 'only-children' may have certain

behaviours or thoughts like being self-centred or indifference, which may cause difficulty in their interactions with others, these issues may be caused by multiple factors and not all 'only-children' have these issues. More importantly, Fan and Yu (2019) acknowledged that there has been a stereotype in society which regards all 'only-children' as problematic. Thus, some public media and researchers, as noted above, tend to stress the links between roommate tensions in Chinese universities and students' identities as the 'only-child' (e.g., Zhao, 2021; Liang, 2010; Hui, 2013), but it seems these arguments require further examination.

In general, under mainstream notions reflected in the above propaganda and sociocultural contexts, college student dorm living and roommate relationships are always tied up with togetherness formation and collective priorities. However, other voices or suggestions have emerged to show a greater variety of roommate relationships in Chinese university dormitories. As for the collectivistic-oriented culture and the 'one-child' policy which are highlighted to support mainstream notions about Chinese college roommate relationships, there are also more multifaceted explanations which form or broaden debates.

As discussed above, many arguments from existing studies of Chinese university roommate relationships align with mainstream notions in these contexts. In this way, debates about these contexts are also considered in my explorations of students' interactions and relationships in the dorm living in the Chinese HE environment. On the other hand, I also noted that these notions are in line with governmental policies about college student dormitories and roommate relationships. Thus, it is crucial to examine the policy environment of the research and practices of student residence and relationships in Chinese university dormitories. However, before focusing on student accommodation policies, I should explain the wider system of Chinese HE to make a more coherent systematic and policy illustration.

2.4 The Chinese Higher Education System

General statistics and geographical distributions of Chinese HEIs

According to statistics from the MoE of China (Ministry of Education of China, 2023), there were 3,013 higher education institutions (hereafter HEI) in mainland China in 2022, including 2,760 regular HEIs offering standard degree or vocational courses and 253 adult HEIs offering adult or further education courses. The regular HEIs include 1,271 institutions offering degree programmes and 1,489 higher vocational colleges. Students should participate in College Entrance examinations. Most of these HEIs are public, administered

and supported by the government and most are under local governmental authority. Based on the statistics of Chinese HEIs in 2021 (Ministry of Education of China, 2022a), around 42% offer degree programmes, 49% are higher vocational colleges and 8% are adult HEIs run by the local ministries of education or non-educational departments.

Geographically, HEIs are found in different areas of China. According to the list of HEIs announced by the MoE of China (2022d), all Chinese HEIs are in cities rather than rural areas. According to the MoE of China (2022d) in relation to the number of HEIs in different regions of China and the census yearbook published by the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2021), most regular HEIs, particularly those offering degree programmes, are in the southern, eastern and middle areas, which have larger urban populations and advanced economies. In China, HEIs are mainly distributed in the municipality directly under the central government (Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and Chongqing) and the capital city of each province, associated with relatively higher levels of population and economic development (Li, 2021).

The hierarchies of Chinese HEIs

In addition to the above categories, and as in the Global North, there are also some hierarchical classifications of Chinese HEIs, based on the institutions' ranks in different league tables, their admission requirements and how they are supported by the central government. Higher-level HEIs usually get more financial and policy support from central government, thus they are more likely to have better educational resources including educational environment and facilities, teachers and students (Wang, 2010). Higher-level HEIs have high entry requirements, especially in relation to the scores candidates get in the National College Entrance Examination. However, students graduating from these institutions are often more competitive in future development (Wu, 2005).

In the hierarchy, the top level is widely thought to be occupied by Peking University and Tsinghua University - both are always at the top of various rankings of Chinese universities. Then there are those HEIs supported by 'the 985 project' (also called 985-project universities), excluding Peking and Tsinghua, which includes 37 universities. At this level, universities from C9 League (also called China 9) are often thought to be particularly elite (Feng, 2015). The C9 League is composed of the top nine universities, including Peking and Tsinghua, which were the first group to be included in 'the 985 project' (Wang and Yang, 2017). This league is often described as the 'Chinese Ivy League' (China News, 2009; Wang, J., 2019). Below these are the HEIs supported by 'the 211 project' (also called 211-project

universities), excluding the 985-project universities, comprising 73 universities. Beneath these are the national and local key universities without 211-project status, then there are ordinary universities which are not identified as being 'key'.

In 2016, the MoE, Ministry of Finance (hereafter called MoF) and National Development and Reform Commission (hereafter called NDRC) of China started a new programme to offer strong support to the development of certain universities and disciplines, aimed at constructing 'world-class universities and disciplines'. This programme is also called 'double world-class construction'. To date, all the 985-project universities and some 211-project universities have been integrated into this programme; certain disciplines of other 211-project universities and some lower-level universities have also been included. According to the regulation of these three national departments (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance and National Development and Reform Commission of China, 2017), this programme is still in progress and more universities may be added; on the other hand, there will be updated evaluation on these selected universities and those that fail may be removed. This is different from 'the 985 and 211 projects' in which the positions are fixed. In this way, this new programme seems to bring some fluctuations to the hierarchy of the above universities. However, based on the up-to-date list of double-world-class-construction universities (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance and National Development and Reform Commission of China, 2022), there seems to be less influence on the position of the universities of 'the 985 project' and even higher levels.

In short, Chinese HEIs at higher hierarchical positions are usually public institutions offering degree programmes, particularly members of core HEI leagues and key national HEI development projects. Compared with HEIs at relatively lower hierarchical levels, those higher-level HEIs can get more governmental attention and funds in general and thus offer their students a better educational and academic environment. In this way, students of these HEIs are more likely to be competitive in society, although the entry criteria, particularly the academic requirements of these universities are usually stricter.

Tuitions fees

Financially, these HEIs charge tuition fees from students, but the rate is regulated by the government. According to *Interim Measure for the Management of Fees in Higher Education Institutions* published by the Ministry of Education, National Development and Reform Commission and the Ministry of Finance of China (1996), the tuition rate of a HEI takes up a certain percentage of its average educational cost per student per year, at a maximum of

25%; the exact proportion depends on the local economy and people's consumption capacity; there can be differences between regions, major and types of institution; students whose families are of poor economic status should be charged less or no tuition and they can be funded through various means like scholarships or loans. In accordance with this regulation and a series of governmental requirements of the transparency and supervision of HEI tuition and fees (e.g., National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Education of China, 2002; National Development and Reform Commission and Ministry of Education of China, 2004; National Development and Reform Commission of China, 2005), the standards of tuitions and fees charged by HEIs should be strictly supervised and examined by local government; there should be a hearing for the decision making and clear public announcement of the determined fees.

In terms of public tuition fees, according to a report in China Education Online, an educational information website officially accredited by the government, the tuitions charged at most public HEIs by 2022 was equal to around 3,000 to 6,000 CNY per year; the tuition for certain majors like art and music and software engineering are more expensive, usually more than 6,000 CNY or even over 10,000 CNY per year; the tuition does not rise much due to government restrictions (Yang, F., 2022). In general, the government controls tuition fees to make sure young people receive chances to access HE. These controls on tuition fees also reflect the government's emphasis on the public HEIs as a kind of public welfare. Such a position and the fees control policy it supports also influence the residential fees of public HEIs in China, which are also always controlled to be relatively cheap and stable. This will be discussed in the following sections.

Compared with public HEIs, the tuition at private HEIs is generally much more expensive, often ranging from around 10,000 CNY to over 100,000 CNY per year. The high tuition fees of private HEIs partly result from the development of the market economy and HE massification in China (Wang and Zheng, 2002; Pi, 2017), but are also largely due to the lack of fiscal associations from the government and much more dependence on students' payment of tuitions and fees, different from public HEIs (Yang, 2012). Meanwhile, private HEIs in China developed relatively late and many have not grown into a mature stage in various aspects, like fund raising and utility, campus construction and student management (Guo, 2004; Wang, W., 2019), which make the organisational environments of many private HEIs more difficult than those in the public sector in a range of issues including residency policy and management of students. Thus, despite high tuition fees, the quality or conditions of the resources including student dormitories in private HEIs vary greatly, showing a more complex or disordered situation (Xie, 2019; Li *et al.*, 2018).

Moreover, as many private HEIs also cannot offer educational resources with the same quality as the public HEIs and many of their students are not good at studying (Wang, Y., 2019; Wang, W., 2019; Xie, 2019), they have not got widespread trust from society, which limits many of them to the low hierarchical levels in the Chinese HE system and impacts the campus environment or atmosphere of these HEIs. As a minority with much fewer number, more specialised and difficult organisational and construction circumstances, it would be better to explore Chinese private HEIs in an independent study rather than in the current project, which reflects the more general situations of student dormitories in Chinese HEIs. Therefore, my research focuses on public HEIs in China which occupy mainstream positions in the current Chinese HE system. The data collected in my research all come from public HEIs.

Student selectivity and access in Chinese higher education

Whether people can become students of Chinese HEIs mainly depends on their scores in the National College Entrance Examination (*Gaokao* in Chinese). This is mainly a written examination focusing on knowledge of Chinese, Maths, Foreign Language and Liberal Arts, and Science (Ministry of Education of China, 2022c). Specific exam papers are written by the National Education Examination Authority and provincial educational authorities and thus may be different in different regions, but the exam time for the same subject is the same across the country (Ministry of Education of China, 2022c). In accordance with the regulations of the MoE (Ministry of Education of China, 2022c; 2018a), international students who meet certain requirements can also take part in *Gaokao*, but it is not mandatory and there will be special admission requirements made by the HEIs they apply for. Although other pathways like exam-free recommendations have emerged in recent years, and some universities and majors may have extra requirements (Ministry of Education of China, 2022c), *Gaokao* is still the key approach for Chinese HEIs to select qualified candidates and the main route for most Chinese home students to gain access to HEIs.

As for other general admission requirements, according to the law and regulations issued by the MoE (Ministry of Education of China, 2018b; 2022c), people who “*abide by the Constitution and laws of the People’s Republic of China, graduate from senior higher schools or reach the equivalent educational level, and meet the relevant requirements of health conditions*” are eligible to participate in the entrance exam and enrol in the universities they apply for. There is usually no governmental age limit on people who take part in the National College Entrance Examination or on being a full-time student in a regular HEI in

China. But according to the latest statistical standards and the related explanations of MoE of China (Ministry of Education of China, 2020; 2019), the age range of the higher education-age population in China is defined as 18 to 22 years old. This age range is also widely applied in Chinese HE studies to theoretically define the age bracket of students in HE (Wei, 2015; Li and Li, 2013). Because of this general age range and the 'one-child' policy from 1982 to 2016, most current undergraduates and many graduates of Chinese universities to date have no sibling or sibling of similar ages (e.g., Gao, 2013; Sun, 2014). As discussed above, in previous sections, this characteristic is always mentioned by researchers, media and policymakers to explain roommate tensions in university dormitories.

Since the late 1990s, student enrolment in Chinese HEIs has been dramatically expanded reflecting a policy shift from an elite to a universal HE sector. As noted by the governmental authorities, this shifting process began from 2002 when the 'gross enrolment rate' was 15%, this ended and became the universalness process from 2019 when this rate was 51.6% (e.g., Ministry of Education of China, 2007a; 2020). This policy shift towards mass higher education was influenced by Martin Trow's (1973) research of HE expansion and transformation in which a country's HE system may go into massification from the elite stage when it offers study places for about 5%-10% of the HE age grade, it may then go on to the universal stage when this rate reaches 50%. In this way, Chinese HE has become massified and many young people with more diversified backgrounds are able to access HE. The mass HE, including the higher educational chances and diversified trend of student groups, has been a focus of HE studies in China and, as with similar debates in the Global North, a wide series of debates about HE equality have emerged (see Yang and Qiu, 2017; Yang, 2010; Boliver, 2011; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton, 2009). As I will discuss in detail in Chapter 3, some of these debates have explored students' personal life and social experiences in higher education.

The significance of 'class collective' in student management systems

In a Chinese university, the administrative units of student management, from top to bottom, are university, department, faculty (in some departments), class. The class is the basic student administrative unit in Chinese universities (Ministry of Education of China, 2004). Normally, students of the same year and major are divided into one or two or more classes based on their student ID or registration number. There is a headteacher and sometimes a tutor in every class responsible for activity organisation, message notification and students' life and study support. Although a class looks like a programme group to some extent, it has more significance than a programme group in Chinese universities. There are usually

decades of students per class (Dong, 2018). They often get together to attend not only lectures, due to having the same major, but also class activities like class meetings, trips, festival parties and study groups. They also work as a team to join events like sports matches organised by superior units like the department. Meanwhile, as the basic administrative unit, class is the unit which students are in most contact with in their university life and it is an important communication channel between students and the department or university (Dong, 2018). On this basis, students can build a sense of belonging to their classes and this close bond can make the class more than a unit but a collective group to them (Dai and Li, 2019). In both governmental and university regulations, class plays an important role in the residency policy and dorm allocation of Chinese university dormitories, which will be discussed in detail in the following sections. To distinguish the class discussed in this section from the social class usually presented in social research, the class as a management unit will be called 'class collective' hereafter.

To summarise, the Chinese HE system is composed of different types of HEIs. Almost all are in urban areas and concentrated in the regions with larger populations and more developed economies. Although Chinese HEIs have been growing in number and variety, there are hierarchies among them, in which the dominant positions are always taken by public HEIs, particularly those offering degree programmes. Home students are enrolled by Chinese HEIs mainly depending on their *Gaokao* scores. Students are mainly around 18 to 22 years old and most of the current student population has grown up with little or no experience of living with siblings, due to China's 'one-child' policy. As a result of HE massification, a larger number of people with more diversified personal backgrounds can now access opportunities in Chinese HE, particularly non-elite HEIs. During college years, students are closely connected with their class collectives and their tuition fees in public HEIs are limited by the government. These situations and trends not only reflect the wider HE context in China, but also influence students' social and living experiences in universities and relevant debates. The discussions in this section also reveal the key or dominant role played by the governmental authorities in supporting and administering Chinese HE systems. In this general context of Chinese HE, the dominance of governmental policies is also present in terms of university student accommodation, which I will consider next.

2.5 Chinese Governmental Policy Concerning University Student Accommodation

Mandatory dorm living and class-collective-based roommate assignment

As noted by Ding (2019), more than 95% of Chinese college students live in university dormitories. For most of these students, living in the dorm is a requirement. According to the notices issued by the MoE of China (Ministry of Education of China, 2007b; 2008) on the management of college students' accommodation, university students are not allowed to live off-campus in principle and there should be strict approval procedures and management of those living off-campus due to special reasons. In Chinese universities, the length of most undergraduate courses are four years. Given that living in the university dormitory is not mandatory for international students (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Public Security of China, 2000), most Chinese home students should live on campus for around four years (excluding the winter and summer holidays), according to governmental regulations. Thus, dormitories become places where young people spend much time in universities during their HE period. As Hu and Deng's (2007) study showed, university students spent more than 80% of non-lecture time in dormitories.

Since the 2000s, the Ministry of Education of China (2004) has emphasised the importance of mandatory on-campus living as a university's responsibility, along with its guarantee of students' personal safety. The MoE policy requirements highlight that students who apply for off-campus living must be approved not only by the university but also by their parents (Ministry of Education of China, 2004). Supporting this the governmental authorities defined student dormitory as *"an essential place for students' daily life and study and a key site for their ideological and quality-oriented education"* (Ministry of Education of China, 2004; 2007b; General Office of Ministry of Education of China, 2008). This approach to students' residency stresses the significance of dormitories to college students' wider social development, particularly in relation to their ideology and values (Ministry of Education of China, 2004; 2005; 2007b). For example, as required by governmental notices, universities should *"organise campus cultural activities based on student dormitories to cultivate students' sense of collectivism"* (Ministry of Education of China, 2004) or *"take student dormitories as the front to organise various ideological education activities, creating a good environment and atmosphere for students' growth and accomplishment."* (Ministry of Education of China, 2007b). In this sense, governmental authorities regard the arrangement and management of students' residential environment as a key part of universities' educational and management strategy – it is as important as academic teaching (Ministry of Education of China, 2004). Based on this agenda of Chinese HE, students' accommodation arrangements are closely bound up with their HEI learning, as on-campus shared living also becomes a compulsory part of HE programmes for young people at university.

Apart from mandatory dorm living, there are also governmental regulations regarding roommate assignment. As mentioned in section 2.4, students' class collective is of significance to university dorm allocation. According to the notices published by the MoE of China in 2004 and 2007, students' class collective (group) is highlighted as a core standard of dorm allocation in Chinese universities (Ministry of Education of China, 2004; 2007b). Based on this requirement, students assigned to the same dorm should belong to the same class collective in principle. This means dorm roommates are very likely to also be classmates in Chinese universities. Due to the special bonds among students of the same class collective (group), having classmates become roommates can make these students' shared identity and relationships become even more multifaceted and build stronger senses of cohesion and a key route for ensuring students' well-being and growth, based on *Strengthening the Management of College Students' Accommodation 2007* (Ministry of Education of China, 2007b). Importantly, dormitories cannot be allocated based on students' financial situations (Ministry of Education of China, 2007b; Ministry of Education of China *et al.*, 2006). Based on this and the massification of HE policy, students sharing a dorm room in Chinese universities are increasingly likely to come from families with diverse financial situations. Moreover, these policies reinforce the non-profit orientation of HEIs, particularly public ones, in terms of student residency. The consideration of students' financial situations is also reflected in the governmental control of the residential fees of university dormitories.

Non-profit orientation of residential fees collection

Government guidance about educational charges updated in 2020 stressed the relatively affordable and steady residential fees of HEIs also highlighting the public welfare property of education as a guiding notion for these policies (Ministry of Education of China *et al.*, 2020). Like the limits on tuition and fees, governmental authorities also set up policies to keep university student accommodation fees relatively stable and not too expensive. Most governmental regulations on university tuition mentioned above, like transparency and governmental supervision, are also applied to students' residential fees. As required by government authorities, student accommodation fees should be charged according to factors like the actual cost of accommodation offered, people's income and the developmental level of the local economy rather than the pursuit of profit; the payment standards made by universities should be approved by the local government (Ministry of Education of China, 2002; Ministry of Education, National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Finance of China, 2006).

In 2003, the maximum student residential fees of Chinese HEIs was limited by the national government to 1,200 CNY per student per year (Ministry of Education, National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Finance of China, 2003). This standard has changed little in the pricing work of the local government and universities in the years to date, based on the notices of local governments and statistical reports offered by many educational media. For example, in a document issued by the Beijing Municipal Commission of Development and Reform (2022), the student accommodation fees of HEIs in 2022 in Beijing ranged from 550 CNY to 1,500 CNY per student per year, according to detailed residential conditions like dorm size and facilities. As required by the government of Shaanxi Province in the northwest, the residential fees of public HEIs should range from 500 to 1,200 in 2022 (Shaanxi Provincial Development and Reform Commission, 2022). As seen in online reports outlining the student accommodation fees of Chinese HEIs in 2022, the residential prices of Chinese public HEIs offering degree programmes generally range from around 500 CNY to 1,500 CNY per student per year (e.g., Yang, F., 2022; Qinglanyouke, 2022).

Thus, corresponding to the policies of both mandatory dorm residence and tuitions and fees, non-profit-oriented pricing of university student residences reflects the meanings of student dormitories as both compulsory training resources and benefits or guarantees offered by HE to students for their all-round development and well-being. On the other hand, dorm living as it concerns students' well-being also extends to dorms being safe and healthy spaces for students, as discussed in the next section.

Dorm design, rules and regulation

According to *Opinions on the Construction Standards of College Student Apartment* published by the MoE of China (2001), a standard undergraduate dormitory should be a four-people room with 8 m² per person, a balcony can be included in each dorm but the bathrooms and toilets are public. In a governmental document issued in 2002 (Ministry of Education of China, 2002), this simple architectural design was emphasised again as the template for university dormitories around the country, as being cost-effective and highlighting how these spaces cultivate a hard-working and thrifty student lifestyle.

Although stressing 'simplicity and frugality', residential safety is always highlighted in national policies. There are regulations to guarantee personal safety, campus security around dormitories and restrictions on overnight dorm stays for people who do not belong to the university (Ministry of Education of China, 1990). Fire safety is also highlighted frequently

and in great detail in government documents. The rules on fire prevention further form restrictions on certain items in students' daily dorm living. For example, according to *Strengthening the Fire Safety Work in Educational Institutions* (Ministry of Education and Ministry of Public Security of China, 2004), college students' behaviours like “*using high-powered appliances and liquefied gas in the dorm*” are regarded as fire hazards which need to be rectified. In *Regulations on Fire Safety Management in Higher Educational Institutions* (Ministry of Education and Ministry of Public Security of China, 2010), the student dormitory is listed as one of ‘the assembly occupancies’ and higher-powered electric appliances are forbidden; HEIs are instructed to keep checking fire safety work in student dormitories where there is a risk. Universities should address problems like ‘illegal use of high-power electric appliances and illegal parking of rechargeable electric bicycles’ in student dormitories, identified as one of ‘the places with high risk of fire accident’ (General Office of Ministry of Education of China, 2019).

In these policy documents, dorm living in Chinese universities are framed as a series of compulsory rules and a place where students spend much of their time. As the only accommodation source for almost all home students in China, dorm life and the interactions between roommates in the dorm occupy a significant proportion of students' campus life. Yet compared with the regulated aspects of university student dormitories, the social aspects are of less concern in government documents and the relevant statements are more general, like ‘cultivating students' senses of collectivism’ (Ministry of Education of China, 2004). Under the authority of the MoE of China (2017), more detailed dormitory rules can be set by individual universities. Thus, it is necessary to move the lens to specific universities to explore how roommate relationships are more explicitly portrayed in their public presentations. In the next section, I discuss how student dormitories and students' social lives are publicly portrayed by universities and how these are associated with and/or develop governmental HE policy.

2.6 Shared Dorm Living and Social Relationships in Chinese University Student Residential Policy

Information about university students' dorm living and roommate relationships is a key focus of universities' documentation. This section discusses how institutions present student residential life and policy information on their official websites and other virtual platforms. The examination draws from a cross-section of ten Chinese universities with various hierarchies and regional locations. Following are the basic profiles of these universities (all are anonymised), including hierarchical levels and geographical locations:

University	Hierarchical position	Location	Area
A University	Top university	Beijing	North
B University	C9-member	Shanghai	Southeast
C University	985-project	Chengdu, Sichuan Province	Southwest
D University	985-project	Tianjing	North
E University	211-project	Hefei, Anhui Province	East-middle
F University	211-peoject	Xi'an, Shaanxi Province	Northwest-middle
G University	211-peoject	Nanjing, Jiangsu Province	East
H University	Key university	Qingdao, Shandong Province	Northeast
I University	Ordinary university	Shanghai	Southeast
J University	Ordinary university	Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province	North

Table 1: Basic profiles of ten Chinese universities

The discussions in this section are based on the results of document analysis. How these universities were selected, the rationales for the selection and how the analysis was conducted are detailed in Chapter 4. Using the data to provide context and to address the first research question, I used the websites' content to explore how Chinese universities present students' shared living and social relationships in dormitories. Content analysis of the HEI websites showed that most of these universities published dormitory-related rules and notices in the subpage of the Logistics Department or Student Affairs Department. These files are mainly under the charge of these two departments. Other information like related news and publicity are also concentrated in the subpages of these two departments

in general, but some of them can also be found in other pages like 'campus life' or 'campus culture'.

All these universities established other information dissemination platforms for the public along with the official portal through their official public accounts on Weixin (WeChat in English, a popular instant messaging and social media software in China), where there is much information about student dormitories, mainly focusing on introducing or advertising the residential environment, explaining certain university accommodation rules and displaying some part of dorm living, particularly dorm decoration and roommates' friendships. Although these universities are different in terms of aspects like profiles and the appearance of the official digital platforms, they are notably similar in how they present student dormitories and roommate relationships in their residential policies - three key themes appeared across these ten websites and are examined in detail below.

Rule-bound dorm living and roommate relationships

In these universities' student residency policies, the rules on students' behaviour and values in dorm living and roommate interactions take up prominent positions. In terms of dormitory rules, these universities are widely in line with governmental authorities. Firstly, they reinforce the mandatory nature of on-campus dorm living highlighted in government policies. For example, according to the regulation of *E University*, "all the full-time home undergraduates must live in university dormitories in principle". These students can only apply for off-campus living due to one of the following special reasons:

Health reasons (infectious diseases, nervous breakdown or disability, etc.) which has been certificated by the doctor as not suitable for dormitory life; special family circumstances and the family (immediate family) is located in or near the university; parents (or guardians) need to live in or near the university to accompany the student for special reasons; other special situations deemed unsuitable for collective residence by the department. (E University)

Apart from these limited conditions for living off-campus, applications will also be closely scrutinised, according to *E University*. Similarly, a strict confirmation process for students' off-campus living application is also found in other universities' rules, in which students need to get permission from various university institutions and staffs to confirm the application. Most of these universities also make 'approval of the applicant's parents' an important requirement

for the application to be permitted, which increases the restrictions on young people's plans for off-campus living. These rules not only set up marked difficulties for students to live outside of their universities, more importantly they make it difficult for young people to leave this kind of shared living during their college years.

As difficult as living off-campus is, students in most of these universities usually have less chance to select the dormitories or roommates and change the dorm. For instance, in the student dormitory allocation rules of G University, students' dorm rooms are all arranged by the Student Affairs Office; students cannot make any changes without permission. Many universities also posted procedural regulations on dorm changing applications and confirmation; some universities like I University clearly list a series of permissions the students should get before finally gaining the final confirmation:

Applying to the administrators of the current dorm building → getting approval → completing an application form and submitting it to the department → getting approval and signatures from the tutor and the leader of the department → submitting the form to Dormitory Service Centre for examination and confirmation (with signatures from relevant staff) → getting notice from the centre if approved. (I University)

A similar process is shown by other universities, including the more elite ones like B University, in which the students who apply to change their dorms must submit an application form and be approved by the class tutor, the department and faculty and the Management Committee of the residential community. The officially dominated dorm room arrangements and the restrictions and strict confirmation procedure of dorm changes further consolidate the rule-bound character of students' dorm living. Meanwhile, these regulations not only widely limit students' abilities to change dorms, but also restrict their ability to change roommates. Thus, most students at these universities are expected to live with the same roommates through the whole period (four years) of their college dorm experience.

In the regulations of J university, students cannot change their dorms unless there are 'special situations'. This university sees 'roommate conflicts' as an example of such 'special situations', which seems to illustrate a concern about the negative influence of roommate conflicts on students' dorm living. However, even with this reason, the application should still be strictly examined, approved and signed by leaders of the applicant's department and faculty, before being censored and filed by the University Student Affairs Office. There is no further explanation about what kind of conflicts can permit students to be allowed to change

dorms. Thus, although this reference may reflect the university's awareness of tension management in student dorm living, it does not make dorm conflicts a focus of attention on the college website.

In addition to regulated dorm arrangements, everyday dorm living issues including safety and cleanliness are also widely remarked on by these universities and ruled on in their documents. In these universities, male and female students are assigned to separate buildings or levels of a building. They also restrict people who are not registered residents from accessing the dormitory building and such people are not allowed to stay in the dormitory overnight. In some universities, this limit is particularly set up for men accessing female students' dormitories. For example, as reflected in the rules of A University, "*male visitors cannot enter female students' apartments without the permission from the administrative staff of these buildings*". In I University, "*visitors should leave students' dormitories after 9 pm and male students should leave female students' dormitories after 5 pm*". Apart from restrictions on visiting, there are also dorm return rules, under which students should return to their dorms every day by the closing time of the dorm building in the evening.

Following governmental policies, these universities are also concerned about the fire safety of student dormitories, mainly embodied in their forbidding of fires and relevant devices or high-powered electric appliances in dorms. Some universities like A University and J University particularly explain their prohibitions in the form of knowledge propaganda of electricity or fire safety, telling students to take care of the safety of not only themselves but also others in the dorm building. In general, although these safety-related rules are linked by these universities to their high attention to students' residential safety, these restrictions and requirements on students' behaviours also illustrate these universities' emphasis on cultivating students' sense of responsibility for both personal and collective safety. This further shows these universities' requirements on their students for forming collectivistic awareness through dorm living.

Apart from safety-related behaviours, students' behaviours in other aspects of daily dorm living are also regulated by all these universities, based on the emphasis on a civilised, orderly and comfortable residential environment and cultivating students' good lifestyles. In addition to regulations about common public order like 'no strenuous sports in the building' or 'no pets', all these universities require students to keep their dorms clean and tidy and emphasise the inspection of dorm cleanliness conducted by administrators or other university staff. For example, as regulated by H University, the cleanliness of dormitories

should be inspected once a week. Some universities even clearly listed the standards of dorm cleanliness and tidiness, involving various aspects like “no smell”, “clean and tidy furniture including beds”, “clean floor without stain or trash” and “neatly arranged objects including chairs and personal items” (for example, H University and E University). Thus, these lifestyle-related rules also reflect the educational or training nature of the university dorm living.

Through these rules, students' living habits are collectively regulated, they are required to nurture domestic civility and the ‘good’ lifestyles framed by the universities for all-round growth. Maintaining the cleanliness and tidiness of a dorm needs the collective efforts of the roommate group, thus the relevant regulations also involve cultivating students' collectivistic awareness and senses of belonging to their collective dorms. Yet most of the university websites presented only very general requirements on students' interactive behaviours, like ‘roommates should be solid and respect each other’, ‘get along well and make the dorm harmonious’, ‘students should be friendly and polite’ or ‘care for the group’. However, the solidarity or harmony of roommate relationships is widely regarded by these universities as part of criteria for a reward-and-punishment system widely established to inspect and examine students' behaviours in dormitories, linking their compliance with the above dorm living regulations to the grant of their university scholarships and the results of important university evaluations or elections.

This reward-and-punishment system is raised by most of these universities in the items or even a specific section in the student residency regulation. For example, in the rule of G University, “*Students' performance in the dorm is an important part of the evaluation of their behaviours, it is also a necessary basis for students to serve as student cadres, apply for scholarships or student loans and gain honours or rewards in the university*”. Similarly, as regulated by F University, student dorm groups or students who perform well could achieve a title like ‘the civilised dormitory’ and get priority for gaining certain fundings, honours and good results of university evaluations; by contrast, those who fail to reach the criteria are at a disadvantage in gaining these awards, support or positive evaluation results; those who break the rules will be warned, criticised in a circulated notice or even severe punishment, based on the severity of the behaviour. Other universities are like F University and G University in setting up the rewards and punishments in their documents, based on criteria including both residential and social requirements shown in regulation documents. Universities like E University particularly displayed these criteria in detail, involving a wide range of aspects of university dorm living including safety, order, cleanliness, civility and the togetherness of roommates. The reward-and-punishment system strengthens the power of

these university rules on student residence, through which they also reinforce the impacts of university regulations and requirements on college students' shared dorm living. The engagement of performance examination further demonstrates and consolidates the training nature of Chinese university dorm living. Moreover, the force of these residency rules can also tighten the bonds between college roommates in cases in which the rewards or punishments are conferred on every member of the roommate group. For instance, as regulated by *I* University, if a dorm does not pass a cleanliness inspection for more than ten times, every member of the dorm would be disqualified from a range of honour grants and elections.

The above regulations and their power illustrate the rule-bound features of student dorm living framed by these Chinese universities. Nevertheless, on some university websites, the regulations of dormitory allocation start to allow students to make choices about dorms and roommate types. *F* University allows online dorm selection for new students on the university website and WeChat platforms, according to which students can select the specific buildings, rooms and even the beds they like from the dormitories assigned to their departments by the university. Although focusing on the selection of locations and physical spaces of dormitories, there are slogans like 'you decide the roommates you live with' in the guidelines, reflecting the ways in which this university has begun to recognise the importance of students' choice, marketization and the connection between social and spatial environments to students' wider well-being and dorm living. In the introduction of student support services posted by *D* University, students' personal preferences and habits are considered in official allocation of dormitories and roommates. The more flexible dorm arrangements, giving students more freedom on selecting dorms and roommates, may illustrate a possible trend in Chinese dormitory provision and regulation, although these changes may also reflect markets and competition to recruit students.

Publicity around 'home sharing' and dorms

Apart from the rules and regulations, these universities also posted a range of marketing documents on their official webpages, displaying or advertising the physical conditions of dormitories, students' dorm living and roommate relationships to their staff and students and the wider public. Documents showing material residential conditions usually include images of dormitory rooms and the surrounding environment. According to the presented pictures and relevant introductions from these universities, I found many commonalities among the universities in terms of dorm design. Most dorm rooms are 4-6-people rooms with loft-beds or bunk beds, although some dorms also contain bathrooms and/or balconies. The general

architectural structure and fundamental furnishing of the dorm rooms are also widely similar among these universities: simply decorated rooms with basic furniture like desks, chairs and lockers or shelves.

Excluding such a high homogeneity in the layout, these universities are slightly different in some selling points of residential conditions, many of which are facilitated by their dorm rooms or buildings but not widespread in the universities across the country. Some universities highlight the air conditioning in the dorm rooms, particularly those located in the eastern or southern regions with hotter weather in summer (like C University and I University). Some emphasised 24-hour public study rooms outside the dorm rooms to help students manage study time more flexibly in the accommodation, especially those at the relatively higher or more elite positions of the HEI hierarchy noted above, like B University and F University. In addition to these special points, the surroundings of the dormitory building like the scenery and the warm and helpful administrators or service teams are also advertised by some universities to demonstrate the comfort of their student dorms (like J University). According to these universities' presentations or advertisements of students' residential environments, there have been some advances made by Chinese universities in student dorm conditions, beyond the governmental policies made years ago. However, the simplicity of the general dorm design and furnishing is still the core feature of dormitories presented by these universities.

The basic decoration and furnishing style of these ten universities reflect an approach to dorm design that focuses more on students' residential life and roommate relationships. For instance, after showing the dorm spaces which look a little simple and even a little old-fashioned or basic, A University acknowledged these characteristics, but then mentioned in the introduction document: *"The basic hardware is guaranteed. In fact, no matter what type of residences you live in, the coolest things are forming harmony, solidarity and friendships with roommates and working hard together with them. These guys will finally become the best part of your college memories"*. Similarly, when introducing their dorm rooms, B University highlighted *"the happiness from communal growth"* and *"the brothers/sisters of the upper/lower bunks"* to describe the togetherness and friendships students can find in these shared residential spaces. Similar expressions also include *"although the dorm is a little crowded, our relationships are pretty good"* (H University) - such sentences emphasise the intimacy and benefits formed in this kind of shared living; some also position college roommates as *"surrogate family"* and link roommate intimacy to *"family-like"* closeness, shedding light on the arguments of Heath and colleagues (Heath *et al.*, 2017, pp. 108 & 113). This underlines the theme of 'home' widely presented on a majority of these universities'

webpages about student dorm living.

On the pages introducing student residency, student dormitories are often described as a 'home' for students: the phrases like 'your home for these four years', 'your home in the university' or 'my little nest' are also widely used by these universities. The notion of 'home' is also emphasised on some of the webpages through the presentation of students' residential life, through a focus on students' decoration of their dormitories. Some universities like *F University* and *G University* posted specific documents showing various photos of student-decorated dorms. Many photos show the communal decorations made by college roommates together. Along with these photos, there are explanations of how these things made students' dorm living more vibrant or comfortable and how they built a sense of cosiness and a feeling like a home from it. In general, the publicising of students' dorm decorations stresses these students' sense of home and belonging to their dorms. Displaying college roommates' collective participation in the decorations further highlights a sense of 'home sharing' in dorm living.

In many universities, including both the relatively more elite and the less elite, student dorm decoration is a part of a Dormitory Cultural Festival, a widespread residential activity at these universities. As reflected in their online publicity documents, a more important section of this festival is usually about roommate interactions and relationships. Many universities regularly post lists or reports about 'role-model' dormitories in which the roommate groups perform very well in dorm living, according to the examination criteria previously discussed. These college roommates usually rigorously comply with the residential rules, keep the dorm clean and tidy, and more importantly get along well with each other and maintain the solidarity and intimacy in dorm living.

Many universities also displayed a range of stories of 'role-model' dormitories on their websites. Although the stories are generated from different roommate groups and universities, most of the ways of interactions and relationship negotiations in these 'role-model' dormitories share main points. These stories widely emphasise the roommates' mutual help and encouragement in study and the academic success achieved by everyone as a result. As reflected in most of these stories, roommates in these dormitories always help and care for each other in daily life and study; they often communicate, study and have fun together; they can understand each other and solve their problems quickly when negative experiences emerge in their interactions; they have formed close relationships sometimes described as being like families. As the 'role-model' performance in the 'non-academic' HE training in university dormitory, the sense of cohesion, caring behaviours and social skills

and awareness in shared living shown in these stories illustrate the competences which the universities and the government expect the college students to acquire. The publicising of these competences also further demonstrates the notion of sharing, due to the frequent presentations of 'being together', 'mutual assistance' and 'integration'.

Apart from the publicising of 'role-model' dormitories or outside of the time of cultural festivals, many universities also organise residential activities for roommate groups, like getting students to show the names they give to their dorms or post photos, interesting stories or vlogs with roommates (for example, *B University* and *F University*). These activities also embodied these college roommates' 'sharing' of fun time and relaxation. The embodiment of 'home sharing' is also shown in the titles or slogans of some digital propaganda posters of dorm living and roommate relationships. For instance, a poster on the webpage of dormitory culture of *A university* shows the scenario of collective dorm cleaning, with a slogan that reads "*My home is small, but we get four people here*". Similarly, *B university* displayed a poster series publicising compliance with dorm-related rules and maintaining dorm harmony, titled "*Dormitory is a little home, please love and care for her*". These titles and slogans and roommates' collective actions underlined by these posters also reflect a sense of 'home' which the universities expect the students to generate in dorm living, but they focus more on the collective responsibilities taken by roommates together to look after their communal 'home'.

The above publicity about the intimacy formed in shared dorm space, the 'role-model' dormitories and the dormitory culture reflect the great significance of 'sharing' or 'being together' to these universities to frame the notion of 'home' to support the dorm arrangement, marketing or publicity documents on their websites, particularly in terms of roommate relationships. Based on this notion, people experience life together and "*norms, values and meanings*" in the same spatial and temporal circumstances in the communal lifeworld (Ebert, 2017, p. 24). In this sense, the concept of 'sharing' is the basis on which these universities build close connections between 'dormitory' and 'home'.

In general, although these universities are at different levels of HEI hierarchy and located in various regions, they are largely homogeneous in terms of their approach to policy setting on student dormitories and roommate relationships, according to the relevant regulations and publicity presented on their official webpages. Most of their regulations and public announcements are consistent with wider HE policies about university student residences. These universities generally portray student dormitories and shared residential life as a form of compulsory non-academic training through which students acquire competencies

including prioritising the collective, forming an awareness of safety, order and togetherness and cultivating civilised and healthy lifestyles. The student dormitory is also widely portrayed as a 'home' for every member of the roommate group, where these young people share the residential spaces and living experiences. Although there seem to be contradictions in how these university webpages present dormitories as sites of control and rules but also residential comfort and homeliness, the 'home sharing' notion emphasises an expectation or behavioural guidance for these college roommates to become close to each other like families and take obligations together to preserve their dorms under the university policies and rules. In this sense, the core of the 'home sharing' focuses on cultivating students' sense of responsibility and belonging to the group and awareness of sharing.

The emphasis on building family-like intimacy in a shared dorm in these universities' online pronouncements also offers directions for students to acquire social competences about forming harmony and solidarity in the dorm collective, as the university and the wider HE policies desire. Therefore, the two parts of the presentations are both underpinned by the collectivistic-oriented notions and the educational or training nature of university student residencies for students' acquisition of competent citizenships. These are also the key ideas supported and reflected in these universities' student residency policies, as shown on their official webpages.

Conclusion

This chapter presents and discusses the context of Chinese college roommate relationships in terms of policies and regulations, propaganda and public opinion, culture and academic research, based on academic literature, media and governmental documents and official Chinese university webpages. According to my review of the academic literature of university roommate relationships based on the Chinese context, scholars tend to focus more on individualistic and psychological discussions rather than social based explanations for college roommate relationships (e.g., Zhu and Zhu, 2011; Wang and Wang, 2014; Liang, 2008). Moreover, there is much focus on roommate conflicts, but these tensions are always attributed to students' lack of cohesion or collectivistic awareness (e.g., Liang, 2008; Huang and Guo, 2016; Wang, Dong and Feng, 2017) - with some arguments taking a judgemental tone (e.g., Li, H., 2006; Xianyu, 2016).

Similar opinions stressing students' responsibility for aspects of dorm solidarity and harmony are also presented in many reports and comments in the public media, particularly those analysing crimes caused by roommate conflicts or successful cases of roommate

relationships. Public media, especially the mainstream media, widely highlight the educational nature of university student residence and the social and ideological competences college students should acquire from shared university dorm living, including group spirit and prioritising the collective. Most public media also link the dorm tensions to students' failed acquisition of these competences; some further connect these to students' lack of sibling experience due to the 'one-child' policy in China from 1982 to 2016. However, some voices from online discussions display more complex aspects of shared university dorm living and roommate relationships. The academic and media contexts reveal a wider sociocultural context and debates involving the collectivistic-oriented culture and China's 'only-child' generations.

These contexts are also associated with a wider policy and institutional context concerning the Chinese HE system and governmental policies of university student accommodation. The Chinese HE system consists of various HEIs and their hierarchies, HE tuition and fees in public HEIs are controlled by the government, to make the education in these institutions non-profit and public welfare oriented. Over the decades, HE massification has allowed an increasing number of people from various personal backgrounds to access Chinese HEIs. In Chinese HEIs, the 'class collective' is an important student management unit which even influences the assignment work of university student residences. In the construction and operation of the Chinese HE system, governmental authorities occupy a core position, which is also reflected in their influence on student accommodation in Chinese HEIs. As reflected in governmental policy and rules, accommodation for most home undergraduates in Chinese universities involves four years of mandatory and rule-bound bedroom sharing with several randomly assigned roommates from the same 'class collective'. According to governmental edict, university student dormitories are regarded as a kind of welfare but also educational sites for students. On this basis, students' shared living is also thought to be a type of 'social training' through which young people are expected to acquire competencies like forming collective spirit, forging the consciousness of safety, order, cohesion, ethics and well-being.

To explore the context in respect of universities, I analysed official webpages about student residency of ten Chinese universities. Despite differences in hierarchical levels and locations, these universities reflect a high homogeneity in terms of rules and propaganda about student dormitories and roommate relationships. Meanwhile, these universities generally show a high consistency with the government in most regulations and publicising of university student residences, conceiving and displaying student dormitories and residential life as mandatory non-academic training for students to gain expected social and ideological competencies. The universities also widely popularised the notion of the 'shared home' to

portray student dormitories, expecting and directing these college roommates to build family-like closeness in dorm living and to take responsibility for their dorms.

In general, there is an evident uniformity among governmental policies, public media viewpoints, academic literature and university policies in terms of students' dormitories and roommate relationships in Chinese universities, emphasising rules, togetherness and the priority of collective benefit. Based on these contexts dominated by official and mainstream discourses, it is necessary to broaden the understandings of university student dormitories by conducting an exploration from students' perspectives, focusing on their living experiences and perceptions on dorm sharing and roommate relationships and how these are different from or connected to these wider contexts. In the next chapter, I review the concepts generated from the wider academic literature, which support the rationale of my research on these young people's everyday personal lives and relationships in these shared dorm spaces.

Chapter 3 Literature Review

Introduction

This review explains and discusses the conceptual framework of my research. As mentioned in previous chapters, my research explores students' living experiences and social relationships in rule-bound and highly shared university residential spaces, focusing on the higher educational (HE) environment, personal life and relationships and their associations with the material spaces in which they are generated and negotiated. Therefore, this chapter draws from and brings together debates from three fields of study: higher education, relationality, and materiality. Reviewing the existing literature in both China and the Global North, especially the UK, my discussions focus on three points: students' experiences of social relationships in mass higher education; friendships within students' shared living in university residences; and the materiality of the shared residential life in university student dormitories. The existing debates I review contain both the notions or approach my research applied and the underdeveloped areas that can be further extended in my research.

The approach of relationality, shared living in higher education and materiality are significant but lacking in current studies of Chinese college student roommate relationships, thus I applied them to make my research conceptually framed from the starting stage. These notions supported my research design, data collection, analysis and discussion. They helped me explore young people's shared dorm living and roommate relationships within the wider context of mass higher education and the institutional environment of Chinese universities. They also helped me probe the interactions and social relationships in university student accommodation through a micro, material and relational gaze, reflecting on students' everyday life experiences and their relations to the spatial design and objects in dormitories. In this sense, these concepts also underpinned the rationales I used to answer the three research questions to reveal how the residential and social practices are conceived and presented by Chinese universities, managed and negotiated by college students and shaped by the material living spaces. Why and how these concepts were applied are discussed in detail in this chapter.

This chapter is divided into four sections. It begins with the debates of mass higher education and its influences on students' experiences of social relationships in both China and the Global North. Then it discusses the approach of relationality and relational

perspectives, particularly in terms of personal life and friendships. Then the relational discussions turn to friendships and other relationship experiences in shared living, including college residential living research in other countries like the US. Finally, this chapter turns to the materiality of personal life and relationships, especially in shared domestic settings, including students' accommodations.

3.1 Mass Higher Education and Students' Social Experiences at University

Mass higher education in China

As I discussed in the last chapter, Chinese HE is thought to be at the mass level, based on the governmental statistics of the 'gross enrolment rate'. The massification of HE has also caused a growing interest in the field of HE research in China. In line with governmental authorities, many Chinese researchers have also affirmed the development of mass HE in China, based on the constant rise of student enrolment in higher education institutions (hereafter called HEIs) (e.g., Huo, 2010; Li, 2014). There are also suggestions highlighting other changes or challenges in the HE massification process, alongside increased enrolment. For example, scholars like Li have discussed Trow's notions about HE massification and noted that the gross enrolment rates are signals of specific stages of HE development and their more important function is warning people of great changes, including the risks which the expansion of HE scales may bring to the whole HE system (Li, C., 2006; Trow, 1973). Researchers like Li (2014) mention the challenges to national financial support to HE, and the diversity of HEIs and socioeconomic development, due to the soaring number of HE students and HEIs in the massification process.

Arising from widened HE access and its effects, there are also many discussions focusing on the inequality behind the massification in terms of people's HE opportunities, which becomes a key theme of debates about mass higher education. Based on the rationale of the transitional phase between the elite and mass higher education argued by Pan and Xie (2001), Yang and Qiu (2017) defined the current situation as post-massification, which is a plateau of HE expansion when it has reached the phase of massification and experienced a period of development. The two researchers observe that although the number of HEIs and entrant rates during this time have been continuously increasing, which seem to offer more HE chances to people with different backgrounds including gender, social class, place and ethnicity, uneven educational resource allocations are an issue and are challenging the further growth of mass higher education. Yang and Qiu (2017) emphasised that fewer rural

students than urban students can enter universities due to poverty, and asserted that students from less developed areas have fewer chances at HE than those from developed areas, attributed to unbalanced HEI distributions and enrolment policy. Similar to this research, the imbalances of HE opportunities associated with regional factors including rural-urban gaps form the main lens of the inequality of Chinese HE opportunities in much existing literature.

As for the rural-urban gap in Chinese HE chances, researchers like Liu (2012) and Wang and Wang (2018) offer more detailed explanations. According to their research, the long-term imbalance between rural and urban areas in the development of economy and society including education has caused obvious gaps in students' opportunities for college entrance. On one hand, like Yang and Qiu's argument, the tuition fees of some universities are still too high to be afforded by ordinary rural families, which may reduce the HE opportunities for rural students; on the other hand, the teaching and other resources of primary and secondary schools in rural areas are generally of lower quality than their urban counterparts, which may make rural students less competitive in terms of gaining access to HE. The unbalanced quality and quantity of elementary education has also been asserted by scholars like Shen and Zhang (2015) and Luo and Wang (2021) to explain why rural students who can study in higher-hierarchy or even top universities are generally fewer in number than urban students in China. According to many researchers (e.g., Lu, 2019; Liu and Zhu, 2021; Luo and Wang, 2021; Zhang and Jiang, 2022), in the under-developed local socioeconomical and educational context, many rural students and their parents lack information and concern about the importance of HE due to the family's financial, professional and educational status, which further reduces rural students' HE opportunities.

There are also suggestions focusing on other regional imbalances giving rise to the inequalities in Chinese HE. For example, Yang (2014) argued that the geographical stratification of HEIs and local protectionism on enrolment in many universities have both reduced access to opportunities, especially to universities of higher comprehensive quality for students from regions with fewer HEIs. By analysing Chinese educational statistics published by the Ministry of Education of China from 2015 to 2019, Li (2022) demonstrated that the geographical distributions of HEIs remained uneven through these years and most of them are still located in the middle and eastern areas rather than in the west. Furthermore, Shen and Zhang (2015) argued that students from provincial capital cities or municipalities directly under the central government have more chances than their counterparts from ordinary cities or towns to gain HE resources of high quality.

Apart from the regional imbalances, particularly rural-urban gaps, the impacts of social class on Chinese HE opportunities are also discussed in a range of literature. According to research by Xie and Wang (2006), for example, students from higher social class (based on their parents' occupations and educational background and the family's economic situation) are more likely to attend HEIs, particularly those of higher quality and ranking, and they are more likely to choose majors that charge more, like Art and Music; in contrast, although the social class gaps between students are relatively narrower in non-elite HEIs, the majors which students of lower social class could actually choose are limited no matter what type of university they could enter. Apart from affordability, Xie and Wang (2006) suggested this may be due to generational transmission of cultural capital. According to Xie and Wang (2006), parents from a higher class usually have a good educational background, thus they are more likely to positively guide and influence their children in academic performance, increasing their competitiveness in terms of getting better HE chances. These suggestions are reinforced in Wang's (2010) research focusing on the HE opportunities in Fujian province in southeastern China. Wang (2010) particularly highlighted that people from higher social class can get more economic, social and cultural capital from their family and thus are more likely to study in the HEIs in the higher hierarchy. Zhong (2016) more explicitly discussed the application of Bourdieu's approach, which emphasises the transformation and exchange among different types of capitals (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991; Grenfell, 2012), illustrating that parents from a more advantaged social class usually hold more and well-structured capital and they can turn social capital like their social network into their children's cultural capital to help them gain better HE resources. Bourdieu's notion is also applied by many other Chinese researchers to demonstrate the important roles played by these capitals in the relations between people's social class and HE chances; most of them further link the debates of HE chances to discussions of wider social equality issues like social stratification, reproduction or mobility (e.g., Liu and Liu, 2010; Lü and Gao, 2011; Liu, 2014; Hu, 2017; Tan, 2017; Tan and Liu, 2020).

The studies above have explored how social inequality influences people's HE opportunities from different perspectives. Most of these studies are built upon macro and quantitative statistics focusing on the relations between students' background information and their distribution or choices on different sorts of institutions and majors. In this sense, these arguments show a macro educational environment where many people start their HE experiences in China. They generally reveal that social inequality still impacts people's HE chances, even in the era after massification, and students with disadvantaged family

backgrounds are more likely to lose HE opportunities or to study in universities with relatively lower hierarchy or unpopular majors. Some researchers have focused on one type of equality issue like regional gaps, some have integrated the regional, especially rural-urban gap, into the social class issue and generally classified rural populations as part of a disadvantaged class with fewer financial and social resources (e.g., Hu, 2017; Tan and Liu, 2020).

However, different conclusions can also be found in the literature. For example, Xu and Fang (2020) revealed that although some students come from rural areas, their families benefit from economic, social or cultural capital and as such they have more access to high-quality HE resources than urban students from less advantaged backgrounds. Thus, how people's backgrounds influence their HE chances actually depends on multiple factors rather than just one indicator. By comparing the statistics in 2007 and 2017, Tan and Liu (2020) demonstrated that the influence of financial factors on the HE chances and choices for students from the disadvantaged social class reduced over this decade, reflecting that the equality issues of HE chances are not fixed points but can shift over time. These arguments also showed that although macro and static data analysis and calculation are useful to the sociological debates of HE, they may ignore the multifaceted and fluid nature of HE practices. As such I now turn to more micro and dynamic accounts of how people experience HE institutions.

Students' university life in mass higher education

In addition to enrolment and HE chances, whether and how social gaps and hierarchy influence students after they access HEIs also forms a core theme of Chinese HE studies. By focusing on students' university life, these studies focus more on how university life is experienced, although most focus on students' academic performance, personal development or well-being or generally investigate overall university life. For instance, through quantitatively testing the correlations between social class and students' performance in university, Zhang and Ma (2018) argued that college students from a higher social class are better at socialising and integrating into university life and are more likely to diversify their viewpoints on the surrounding environment and the wider world. Based on a psychological approach, a range of studies reflect the influences of family backgrounds on college students' mental health, particularly the stress often encountered by those from disadvantaged groups (e.g., Li *et al.*, 2022; Wang, *et al.*, 2022). Meanwhile, researchers like Huang, T. (2016) have explored the connections between college students' consumption of

cultural products or services like entertainment, education or sports and their family's financial status, reflecting that students from higher-income families tend to consume more and are concerned about the personalization and brand of the commodities than those from lower-income families. Chu and colleagues (Chu *et al.*, 2021) revealed that students from the upper social class are generally more well-rounded in other aspects like hobbies, non-major skills and thinking, but they also suggested that these gaps can be narrowed to some extent through years of university life and lower-class students usually change the most.

The importance of the time is also considered by Sun and Liang (2021) who explored the life-course of first-generation college students, including their acquisition of various capitals during their HE period and development after graduation, arguing that disadvantaged family backgrounds may not negatively influence students' acquisition of personal skills and social capital during HE time but may reduce their willing or possibility of continuing study at higher levels. A similar longitudinal approach was employed by Zhu and Cao (2022) in their research on rural students' development from the beginning of HE study to graduation, but through qualitative interviews, this research showed in more detail how these students experienced transitional self-identity and ties with their family and the gradually accumulated capital during HE study.

Apart from the effects of family backgrounds highlighted by many researchers, the roles played by HEIs in the influence of family background on students' university performance and development is also noted in some studies, but these discussions mainly concern basic information about HEIs like hierarchies or majors (e.g., Li and Guo, 2021; Zhang and Lin, 2022). For instance, Li and Guo (2021) argued that the influences of family backgrounds on students' competitions during HE in 985-project universities (defined as elite HEIs by the researchers) are less evident than those in the HEIs at lower hierarchies especially vocational colleges, as disadvantaged-group students enrolled by the elite universities usually have great personal abilities and are very hard-working, which can help them break the limits of their family backgrounds. But as Li and Guo (2021) note, the competitiveness reflected by their research focuses on academic performance, scholarship applications and student leader elections, which did not cover other types of competitions or other parts of university life.

Thus, studies of social equality after HE enrolment above reveal the complexity of university life and the multifaceted and unstable personal experiences of students to some extent. However, as a key part of Chinese HE debates about university life, these existing

arguments are limited by the framework of social equality, background differences and the experiences of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and they mainly focus on students' studies, mental health and personal development during and after HE. By contrast, the complexity of other fields of university life, especially students' mundane residential living and relationship experiences, are seldom focused on by researchers.

Students' interpersonal relationships in universities

Although discussions of students' interpersonal relationships exist in Chinese HE literature, many adopt the framework of (in)equality and are more concerned with students' family backgrounds. For example, Yang's (2010) interviews with several rural college students about their university life revealed that they had experienced discrimination and had been treated differently by urban students and reported feeling more comfortable networking and forming friendships with students from similar rural backgrounds. By quantitatively analysing the connections between college students' interpersonal difficulties and their families' socioeconomic status, Xie (2018) reflected that the influences of family backgrounds on college students' interpersonal challenges are not evident. These different arguments may involve differences in research approach and focus, but the socioeconomic development of rural areas and increasing concerns about students' mental health in universities as Xie explained may also play a role in this difference. In this sense, their conclusions also show the dynamic of college students' interpersonal relationships on campus and their associations with the wider context.

In research by Xie and colleagues (Xie, Li and Bai, 2022), the rural-urban gaps displayed in college students' interpersonal relationships are explored through their use of time. Xie and colleagues reflected that rural students usually spend less time than their urban counterparts on social activities like student societies or the student union, due to their lack of knowledge, interest or need for these interactions and the involved cultural and social capitals during their integrations into the HE fields. Moreover, the impacts of background gaps on students' social relationships in HEIs are also demonstrated by scholars from various perspectives like gender, left-behind experiences in childhood and degree of self-esteem (e.g., Li, X. 2019; Li, J. 2019; Zhang *et al.*, 2021; Long and Wang, 2021).

Like university life, college students' interpersonal relationships presented in the above literature are not simple interactions but can involve various factors like multifaceted personal experiences and feelings about bonding and friendship establishment, the

university and social context and the fluidity of relationships. However, most of these discussions are still restricted to the presentations of social (in)equality in college students' social life on campus, which confines the explorations of students' management of personal life and relationships and the effect of various contexts – apart from the stratified socioeconomic status quo. The focus on background differences is also widely presented in the literature of Chinese university roommate relationships as discussed in Chapter 2.

Some studies of college students' interpersonal relationships or friendships also focus on other issues like psychological and educational discussions, with many of them conducted through quantitative analysis. For example, through regression analysis, Wang and Li (2010) demonstrated the mutual influences among college students' friendships, knowledge exchanges and trust. Similarly, some scholars have explored college students' friendships or social abilities based on model or scale analysis and embedded psychological or mental health-related concepts like subjective well-being, self-presentation, personality, motivation or empathy (e.g., Chen and Wang, 2013; Yu and Ye, 2014; Liu, Kong and Dong, 2017; Wang, Yang and Li, 2020; Han and Guo, 2021). Some researchers have applied social network analysis in their discussions and displayed some possible features of college students' friendships like lacking intimacy, changing overtime and involving students' study, but few have offered detailed or further explanations of these characteristics (e.g., Wang, 2014a; Wang, 2014b; Li, 2013). There are also some explorations focusing on the lack of cohesive student relationships in HEIs, many of them highlighting the 'only-child' generations, growing competition among college students due to expanded enrolment and the rapid development of the Internet and information exchanges, arguing that these phenomena bring problematic characteristics and habits like selfishness, indifference and Internet-addiction to students who have not cultivated mature values, self-identity or social competences (e.g., Sun, 2015; Ge, Tian and Zhu, 2015; Liu and Yang, 2021; Du and Fang, 2015; Wu and Zhang, 2021). Although researchers mention some contextual factors, most have not developed explicit contextual discussions of interpersonal relationships but generally settled on these students' interpersonal consciousness and skills which are thought to be weak or misguided.

Many authors like Yao (2011), Ge and colleagues (Ge, Tian and Zhu, 2015) and Wu and Zhang (2021) have turned to a psychological approach or the moral and value education HEIs can use for students' mental well-being and guide them to acquire collectivistic awareness, solid and warm characteristics and interpersonal competencies. These conclusions are similar to many arguments focusing on Chinese university dormitory tensions discussed in Chapter 2, both mainly attributing students' conflicts to their

incompetence at cultivating collective consciousness and getting along with others, and most discussions about HEIs focus on their moral and cognitive education or guidance rather than other contexts like the material environment. These again reflect the influences of the wider academic debates of Chinese HE research on the main arguments of Chinese university roommate relationships.

To summarise, there is a body of existing current sociological research on Chinese HE that is largely concerned with the effects of socioeconomic background on people's access to and experiences of HE. These studies hint at how social background might affect students' friendships and interactions at university but do not explicitly focus on interpersonal relationships. By developing understanding of experiences of HE institutions beyond the framework of social (in)equality and framing students' lives within sociological debates of everyday life and social relationship negotiations, it is possible to focus on the ups and downs of interpersonal relationships in a sociological way, moving beyond psychological framings. Furthermore, the contexts discussed in most existing studies have mainly focused on the wider social environment of HE massification and capital imbalance, with less attention paid to the context of HEIs, especially the spatial context. It is possible to see similar shifts and trends in the Global North and these are considered in the next section.

Mass higher education and college experience in the Global North

In HE studies based on the Global North context, there is also a significant body of work examining the maintenance of hierarchy and elitism in mass higher education which explores the impact on HE chances, university life and development of students from working-class backgrounds, as well as the experiences of ethnic minority students and those from other marginalised groups like disabled students (e.g., Ellis, 2009; Corby, Taggart and Cousins, 2018; Smith *et al.*, 2019; Wong *et al.*, 2020; Bañales *et al.*, 2021; Wolbring and Lillywhite, 2021; Pryce-Miller *et al.*, 2022). For example, Boliver (2011) illustrated the persistence of social class inequalities in the enrolment of students in British HE institutions despite its expansion over the decades. Elsewhere, in another literature, Boliver (2013) explicitly discussed the unfairness of access to Russell Group universities in the UK, reflecting how it is experienced by people from different disadvantaged backgrounds including social class and ethnicity and those from state schools. Boliver has argued that ethnic minority applicants in the UK are less likely to be enrolled at Russell Group universities, compared to white applicants with the same qualifications, even considering the numerical competitiveness for the applied courses (Boliver, 2015).

Based on interviews with “*policy influencers*” (Brooks, 2019a, p. 6) in the HE system and analyses of relevant policy documents across six European countries, Brooks (2019a) found that students without a family history of HE and those from lower socioeconomic groups are problematized by policy influencers as being passive and instrumental to learning while ignoring social issues. Brooks found that such negative evaluations were more prevalent in HEIs in Poland and Denmark rather than the UK and she further linked this to the wider political context that college students in Britain are regarded as consumers with associated rights due to their high tuition payments, while those in Denmark and Poland are fully funded by the nation and thus have to take responsibility for students' learning and national needs (Brooks, 2019a; Brooks, 2019b). However, this may mainly be reflected in policy documents and the narratives of policy influencers, whereas the influence of social class on students including their university life is maintained in British universities, according to the existing literature. The debate about students being seen as customers in HE has been addressed by many researchers, such as Budd (2017). Although he did not fully deny this notion, he argued that whether and how students are treated like customers in HE environment is a complex issue and it is important to investigate students' experience and understandings of HE and the related wider contexts they face to offer stronger empirical discussions in this debate (Budd, 2017). This conclusion highlights the significance of students' explicit and micro experiences, thinking and feelings to HE debates, particularly those focusing on the associations between students and HEI. Moreover, Brooks (2019b) noted that how students are treated in institutional practice would influence their perspectives of diversity and identity. Future research could explore how students experience and perceive the diversity and identity within HE systems, considering not only students' HE experiences but more importantly how they feel and think about these situations and the contexts in HE studies.

A body of qualitative research reflects on college students' HE experiences and their relevant perceptions. Underpinned by a feminist Bourdieusian approach and taking accent and pregnancy as examples, Loveday (2016) found that working-class students and even some staff, particularly women, could form a sense of shame about their social position in the middle-class oriented field of British HEIs; the shame could be explicitly or implicitly experienced through their affective practice of the moral judgements they encountered in university life and could then become a part of their habitus - in this way, the privilege of middle-class values appears natural. Research by Reay and colleagues (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009) also used Bourdieu's (2010) theory of habitus and fields and the relation between individuals and the wider space of HEI is reflected more clearly in this research.

According to case studies of nine working-class students' lived experience in an elite university (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009), the students on the one hand maintained their working-class self-identity and evaluated the university field as socially limited, but on the other hand they worked hard to comply with middle-class education norm to academically succeed; some even felt a kind of liberation and empowerment in this academic aspect, this partly new habitus was a result of their experience of study, socialising in this unfamiliar elite field.

Al-deen's (2019) research of young Muslim women's agency in HE experiences in Australia also explored gender and class equality in HE, but it used a more multifaceted lens by engaging the concepts of ethnicity and religion in the consideration and embedding of family and community relationships into the investigation of the women's university life and employment development. Through a longitudinal approach constituted by qualitative interviews, this study revealed a large and complex picture of how these young Muslim women, mainly from low-socioeconomic areas, perceived and negotiated their university life, self-identity and personal development throughout their HE journey and how their experiences are associated with their family and community bonds and the wider neoliberal and Islamophobic contexts (Al-deen, 2019).

Like the above examples, many current studies about students' university life experiences show the associations between individuals and HE context through a micro lens. They reflect how people's academic and social experiences and the relevant self-identities and understandings of these lived experiences are formed and shift in their universities and throughout their HE time. In some cases, the life-course discussed included the experiences of enrolment and after-graduation development and thus linked people to the broader HE system. The existing discussions also generally tend to further engage with the wider sociocultural context and some of them, like Al-deen, are built upon a network of various relationships inside and outside HEI. However, these studies are mainly framed in terms of social hierarchy and social justice. Many tend to apply dualistic notions like "*middle-class privilege*" and "*working-class disadvantage*" to explain students' HE experiences or focus too much on students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Davey, 2012, p. 2; Finn, 2015). Taking the transitional experiences to HE as example, Finn (2015, p. 36) noted that the experiences of middle-class students are always thought to be "*lacking the same emotional quality as disadvantaged students*". This tendency limits the explorations and explanations of students' university life at large.

The college experience research focusing on student's personal relationships

As noted by Finn (2015, p. 6), discussions focusing on (in)equality are worthy interests in HE research but she also highlights that young people are “*relational, emotional and embedded in a broad constellation of meaningful and intentional experiences*”. In her research on young women's HE experiences, she still considers the impacts of social inequalities on people's HE life-course, including their social relationships. However, from a relational perspective beyond the binary social equality framework, Finn highlights more multifaceted associations between young women's social interactions and the HE in the UK, reflecting that how people negotiate the relationships and emotions in their personal life and how the HE and wider relevant contexts play roles in these practices are not as straightforward as some existing studies or notions assume (Finn, 2015). For example, Finn's findings reveal how neo-liberal ideas can bring pressure or challenges to people from middle-class backgrounds in various aspects like behaviours, emotions, relationships and development (Finn, 2015). By bringing the structural and personal life domains together, Finn's work shows the significance of a broader relational gaze to the interpretations of people's HE experiences. In further research on students' geographical mobilities in HE, Finn (2017a) highlighted this rationale again and reflected how multifaceted college students' mobilities can be and how these interweave with students' personal networks including the dynamic negotiations of various relationships and emotions.

Prior to Finn's work, similar arguments reflecting the multidimensionality and dynamic of people's HE experiences as being more than the binary and social class dominated conceptual framework were offered in Brooks' (2002, 2005, 2007) research of the interplay between young people's friendships and their HE-related practices, like entry decision-making, transition and HE life experiences. Finn builds on Brooks' personal relationship and experiences-oriented ideas, particularly those before and during HE entrance, to explore the role played by young women's anticipations about friendships in the transition to HE (Finn, 2015). Both Brooks and Finn emphasise the necessity of a relational lens on people's HE experiences, focusing on relationships and personal life themselves and demonstrating more multifaceted and dynamic manifestations of HE practices and debates.

As discussed above, much current literature about the sociology of HE in both China and the Global North reflects the core position of the (in)equality-oriented lens, focusing on social hierarchy or stratification. Most existing debates about HE access and university life are underpinned by the conceptual framework of 'equal vs unequal' or 'balance vs unbalance'.

However, students' everyday relationships and emotional experiences that emerge from relational negotiations are also important aspects of HE (Finn, 2017a). As noted by Finn (2017b), explanations for these relational HE experiences are supported by the ideas of relationality, which is discussed in more depth in the next section.

3.2 Relationality and its Implications

Definitions of relationality and relational perspectives

The relationality approach focuses on relational interpretations of people's agency and identity and the interactions among personal life, relational practices and context (Mason, 2004; Smart, 2007). In a study focusing on the inheritance practices in England, Finch and Mason (2000) suggested that English kinship is relational and dynamic, consisting of relationships and varying with social and demographic contexts. In research exploring how people narrate their personal residential histories, Mason (2004) applied this relational conceptualization to broader relationship fields beyond kinship, demonstrating the importance and variety of the relationality of people's practices and selfhood:

Their practices and identities were embedded within webs of relationships, their own and other people's, and to understand these we need to be able to keep the process of relating in focus just as much as, if not more than, the individual or the self ... while relational practices may well be warm and supportive, they may equally be conflictual, oppressive and exclusionary (pp. 177-178).

By revealing how the multifaceted relationships with others can shape individuals' experiences and sense of 'selves' in various contexts, Mason argues for a relational lens to understand personal practices, identity, agency and how they are personally narrated, highlighting that these personal issues are more than individualised but connected with unfixed social relations (Mason, 2004). Agreeing with Mason, Smart (2007) also applied the relational approach in her study of the sociology of personal life. In terms of the conceptual explanation of relationality, Smart asserts:

The term 'relationism' conjures up the image of people existing within intentional, thoughtful networks which they actively sustain, maintain or allow to atrophy (2007, p. 48).

Smart's (2007) discussions of relationality reinforce the importance of relationships to both thoughts and actions and the complex and dynamic area of social relations. She also notes the significance of emotions and material things to the formations, changes and meanings of relationships and their associations with wider contexts (Smart, 2007). As observed by Smart (2007), emotions are not just individual feelings but derive from certain socio-cultural contexts and can make everyday life meaningful - more than just rational and ineluctable, they help people understand mundane interactions and social relations but also impact people's relational practices and may make certain relationships difficult to end. The important roles played by people's emotions in personal relationships and everyday life are particularly suggested in Holmes' (2010) research on reflexivity. Agreeing with researchers like Burkitt (1997) who defined emotions as relational, socio-cultural and communicative complexes more than tools to express individuals' internal processes, Holmes defined the reflexive process as "*emotional, embodied and cognitive*" (2010, p. 140), arguing for its significance to people's understandings and changes in their relations with others and the wider social and natural world. Holmes (2010) also highlights the importance of interpreting both individual and other's emotions to reflexivity, again illustrating the interactive character of personal life experiences and relationship practices.

Influenced by the above notion emphasising the relational nature and social construction of people's ways of living and sense of self generated in the lifeworld (May and Nordqvist, 2019; May, 2013), Finn (2015) conducted research on people's HE experiences, focusing on young women's negotiations of personal life and relationships throughout their HE life-course. Finn's (2015) explorations are underpinned by the "*relational perspective*", defining people as emotional and relational rather than abstract or just rational individuals and highlighting the dynamic, interactivity and emotionality of relationships in personal life:

Families, friendship networks, housemates and romantic partnerships are not static stocks of capital; they are active, fluid and often intensely emotional connections that require ongoing negotiation, particularly during times of heightened personal change (p. 32).

From the relational perspective, relationships are regarded as a process consisting of interactions and emotions - how this process is experienced is the core work of Finn's (2015) research. Apart from emphasising the importance of 'doing' to personal relationships, Finn

(2015) also stressed that relationship and emotional experiences, including related self-identity, are shaped by and through time and space, detailing the relational perspective in the spatial and temporal aspects. Supported by the relational stance, Finn offered an open and flexible lens to understand people's HE experiences rather than reducing them to fixed assumptions or categories, demonstrating the links among higher education, personal life and social relationships in a fluid context, embedded with material spaces.

Applying a relational approach in Chinese college roommate relationship research

As shown in the last section and chapter, students' HE experiences including dormitory living is constituted by a series of interactions with their roommates as well as the wider environment, but how people manage and feel about their interpersonal relationships are complex and fluid. The relational approach can help conduct explorations of these personal interactions and emotional experiences within young people's HE life-course using a dynamic and multifaceted lens. Drawing on Finn's (2015) relational perspective, my project can probe into how college students' relationship management processes are embedded in dynamic and spatial contexts. Furthermore, as discussed in the last chapter, providers in the Chinese HE system simply connect college roommate conflicts to students' lack of collectivism and reinforce the importance of maintaining harmony in building comfortable roommate relationships. These views also reflect a static assumption about students, which neglects the dynamic negotiations of personal relationships, students' emotions and how they interact with the wider material and sociocultural context. In this sense, with the help of a relational approach, students' management of roommate relationships could be regarded as "*relational transactions rather than abstract rules of obligation*" (Finn, 2015, p. 32). Building on this, I discuss roommate relationships in Chinese universities through a micro and grounded gaze, based on these young people's relational and emotional exchanges in everyday life, with an engagement of the wider environment.

As revealed in the discussions above, although the relationality-oriented concepts emphasise the importance of personal experiences in everyday life, the roles played by sociocultural or institutional contexts in these relationship practices are still discussed. What makes the relational approach distinctive is that it takes personal relationships as the starting point and then explores how the macro debates or environment shape or connect with these complex relationship negotiations in daily life. For example, Smart (2007) suggests that researchers should keep a balance between personal meanings and social and cultural meanings in data analysis and should avoid ignoring either the individual agency or the

structural issues which may seldom be referred to by participants. In this way, although the relationality approach stressed that “*actions, identities and values are fundamentally embedded within webs of relationships*” (Finn, 2017b, p. 421), such relational webs do not just involve individuals but are also structure bound.

This rationale is illustrated in many studies underpinned by a relational approach. For instance, in Finn's research on women's HE experiences (2015) and students' mobilities in HE (2017), discussed above, she offered micro and relational explanations of macro concepts like social equality and mobility in HE, from the perspective of personal life and relationships. Similarly, in research on people's transitions from university to work and employment, Finn (2017b) discussed macro social and HE issues like graduates' post-HE transitions and career development through the lens of intertwining between students' relationship experiences and decision-making. In this research, Finn (2017b) also discussed universities' effects including teaching quality on this relational web, demonstrating more multidimensional individual-structure connections and deepening the arguments of these HE debates. Thus, the approach of relationality and a relational perspective can not just support my research lens, focusing on personal living experiences and relationship negotiations. More importantly, they can also help me build connections between personal life and the broader structure including the institutional environment of universities. This helps me in extending current HE studies by linking it with the field of personal life and relationships. It is particularly significant to my research on college roommate relationships, which involves social relationships and residential life but is also closely related to policy environment and universities' institutional context.

Furthermore, the emphasis on practices highlighted by these approaches (Smart, 2007; Finn, 2015) can also help integrate the sociocultural context into my analysis. As discussed, the assumption of collective awareness or spirit widely applied in Chinese research of roommate relationships to some extent reflects Chinese sociocultural backgrounds, but as revealed by some literature, such sociocultural contexts in practice in contemporary China is not so simple or partial (e.g., Yang, 2015; Yang, 2018; Chen, 2010). Applying a relational perspective which emphasises the multiple and fluid intertwining between personal experiences and the wider network from which they emerged (Finn, 2015; 2017) enables my research to move beyond existing debates about roommate relationships in China. As such I explore how such a sociocultural context is understood and works in the process of these college students' relationship and emotional negotiations in their everyday shared dorm living in practice.

In general, the relational approach helps to explore college students' personal life and social relationships in the shared university dormitories through a relational, dynamic but also contextual gaze as to fundamental theoretical stance in this research. On this basis, the relational approach further assists my applications or extensions of the ideas involving friendships, shared living and materiality in the discussions of Chinese college student residence and roommate relationships. The next section reviews the sociological concepts of friendships, which are also influenced by relational notions but more specifically facilitated my discussions about the complex of relationship and emotional experiences in roommates' interactions.

Sociology of friendships and critical associations

The sociology of friendships is also an important field of the sociology of personal life. In this field, different friendship studies have been conducted from various perspectives. Giddens' (2008, p. 58) notion of "*pure relationships*" depicts relational forms, friendship being a key example, and characterises relationships as characterised by democratic choices made by each party "*for its own sake*". However, other researchers make different arguments: for example, Jamieson (1999) indicated the idealised characters of pure relationships and noted that intimate relationships like friendships can be multifaceted and contextual related. Similarly, according to Allen (1998), friendships are not simply a personal choice, but are influenced by social factors:

Rather than being simply a matter determined by the individuals concerned, friendship is patterned according to social conventions whose roots lie in the broader social and economic milieus in which the individuals involved are located (pp. 686-687).

Following Allen's contextual conceptualization of friendship, Neal and Vincent (2013) argue that, although parents with various backgrounds including social class and ethnicity could make friends because of their children's friendships in a multicultural environment, their social and cultural backgrounds still impact their experience and negotiations of this kind of friendship. Similarly, research by Brooks (2002) found that the transition of young people's friendships could happen due to a change of environment, even though it usually takes time to finish; more importantly, Brooks also highlighted the certain context (Emily Davies College in southern England) that this relational phenomenon was based on. In other research,

Brooks reflects the important role played by college students' backgrounds in their negotiations of university friendships and the formation of their self-identity in this process (2007). According to Brooks' arguments about university friendships, the friendships between college students could be manifested differently in different contexts, friends can support each other emotionally in social settings while competing in study, thus, closeness and distance, intimacy and self-interest can co-exist in the same friendship (Brooks, 2007). It seems that emphasising the context helps sociological research on friendships move away from individual gaze to establish a balance between personal meaning and structural issues, as stressed by a relational approach (e.g., Smart, 2007).

This rationale is also useful in my study of roommate relationships. Due to a preoccupation with conflictual relationships, how college roommates build and manage friendships has received less attention in literature about Chinese HEIs. Also, as noted above, although social (in)equality and students from disadvantaged class are important focuses of HE studies, a micro and relationship-based lens are also needed to extend the current debates. Thus, the sociology of friendships provides a relational and dialectic conceptualization of roommate relationships for my research.

Because the wider context is intricate, friendships also show the characteristic of complexity. On one hand, friendships are dynamic; on the other hand, friendships are diverse. These two features are shown in research by Spencer and Pahl (2006), which identified blurred boundaries between friends and other relationships, and also shows various types of friendships and the dynamics of friendships throughout a personal life course. In their research, Spencer and Pahl developed the concept of 'personal community' which could include all these diverse and shifting relationships. However, even in this wide community of relationships, friendships are limited to those *"that are considered important in people's lives"* without *"the dark side of friendship, about unsatisfactory, competitive or destructive relationships"* (Spencer and Pahl, 2006, pp. 46 & 2). Nevertheless, this reflection shows that the experiences brought by friendships can be diversified, which can mean ambivalent or even difficult. This idea is further demonstrated in research on critical friendships. The notion of critical associations is raised to challenge the widespread understandings of friendships *"as a source of relational goods and as a model for democratic relating"* (Heaphy and Davies, 2012, p. 311), and *"as based on personal choice"* (Davies, 2019a, p. 72).

The concept of critical associations contributes a more practical and multidimensional perspective to the sociology of personal relationships. According to studies of critical

associations (Heaphy and Davies, 2012; Davies and Heaphy, 2011), interpersonal relationships – whether friendships or other associations – are not always as democratic or supportive as they are traditionally defined or taken for granted; in certain spatial and temporal circumstances, they can also be experienced as problematic and constrained; meanwhile, friendships may not be terminated easily, due to practical and emotional factors.

Embedding the notion of critical friendships in the Chinese context

Idealised relationships are also reflected in Chinese research. Many existing studies on college roommate relationships overemphasise their communal and harmonious character and ignore the complexities of interpersonal relationships, thus they take for granted the hidden relationship work of negotiations and conflict management. By applying the concept of critical associations to Chinese college roommate relationships, I analyse them as critical and multiple. By focusing on both the positive and negative sides of roommate relationships, my research generates a more comprehensive and practical understanding of college students' relationships and emotional experiences in dorm living, especially the intertwining between closeness and tensions and the existence of ambivalence, these are more complex than the taken for granted dualisms implied in current research such as being selfish or not or being solid or not. Furthermore, in the Chinese literature about friendships in HE, they are still generally defined as rewarding and supportive and are thought to be associated with positive emotions (e.g., Wang and Li, 2010; Yao, 2011; Chen and Wang, 2013). My research also offers a conceptual update by introducing the notion of 'critical friendships' in Chinese HE debates. Moreover, I extend this concept by embodying it in the context of students' shared dorm living in universities, explicitly discussing how these critical experiences can emerge from, affect, develop and be shaped by young people's social and spatial life in dormitories, with the evident embeddedness of university rules. In this sense, the sociology of shared living, particularly that focusing on college student accommodation, is significant. Meanwhile, the notion of critical associations has been applied in shared living research (Heath *et al.*, 2017), which also suggests the needs to reflect on the literature of this field below.

3.3 Sociology of Shared Living and HE Student Residency

The emergence of sociology of shared living

As a kind of residential arrangement, there are various forms of shared living, based on different factors like the types of sharing or sharers. For example, in a typical house sharing arrangement, the kitchen, bathroom and living spaces are usually communal for the sharers, but bedrooms are personal spaces, usually with an access limit for housemates, and housemates usually share the rent and housework (Clark *et al.*, 2018). Apart from house or flat sharing among non-related people, some people also live in a family home as a non-kin resident, like lodgers (Allen, 1989). Shared living also exists in nursing homes or residential homes for elderly people offered by caring institutions (Higgins, 1989; Calkins and Cassella, 2007). Focusing on these diversified modes of shared living, there is a range of sociological studies from various perspectives. For instance, Tummers' (2016) review of existing co-housing research clarified the understandings of various types of co-housing in Europe and reflected on the possible benefits and challenges they can bring to the planning of urban spaces and a cohesive social environment, through a lens of urban development. Hardey (1989) discussed how lone parents live their residential life and make a sense of home in shared accommodations. Heath (2004) conducted research on young people's choices, shared residential life and generation of closeness and communal identity in peer-shared households, embedded with concepts of adulthood, neo-tribalism and quasi-communes.

In shared living research, concepts of family or home life and relationships are also frequently applied to help understand the non-kin domestic life and relationship experiences. For instance, Heath and colleagues (Heath *et al.*, 2017) showed how people try to build family-like relationships in their shared households through a range of family-like practices like sharing mundane routines and rituals, and how some people feel a sense of family-like togetherness in their interactions with other sharers. However, their research also reflected some different ways of household sharing, like regarding other sharers as 'someone I live with' and rejecting close bonds, interacting with others just for necessity or politeness, or trying to minimise shared daily time. For these people who prefer privacy, paying more attention to private time and space rather than communal life or social relationships in shared household can also help create home-like feelings around their residential life (Heath *et al.*, 2017). In this way, Heath and colleagues showed that people's feelings and negotiations of non-kin shared living can be multifaceted and how they understand and embed the home-like or family-like lifestyles or relationships with this kind of shared household also depends on unstable and diverse thinking and emotional bonds. As mentioned earlier, Heath and colleagues also highlighted the concept of critical associations (see Heaphy and Davies, 2012) from the sociology of friendship in their explanations of the

variety of emotional experiences people can get from their relationship negotiations in household sharing, which includes both positive and negative feelings (Heath *et al.*, 2017).

My research applies and extends Heath and colleagues' (Heath *et al.*, 2017) arguments about the variety of non-kin shared household living and the critical insights into sharers' relationships and emotions in this form of living, not just by engaging them in a Chinese HE and student residential context, but more essentially by further discussing the roles played by universities' residential rules in these young people's interactions in shared living and the interweaving between these young people's domestic and academic or other university-related experiences. Building upon this, my research further explores how the 'home-like' dorm living conceived by many Chinese universities, as shown in the last chapter, is practised in the mundane life of students.

Like Heath (2004), my research also focuses on young people's shared living and explores people's mundane life and relationships, but my research more specifically focuses on student residences in HE, thus I mainly review the literature in this respect in the next subsection. Meanwhile, as shown in the sociology of shared living, including Heath's research, people's economy-based considerations always play important roles in their choices about shared living and sometimes further influence their relationship negotiations in shared households (e.g., Heath, 2004; Heath *et al.*, 2017; Clark *et al.*, 2018). However, in the Chinese context, as mentioned in Chapter 2, dorm residency is usually compulsory and rule-bound, thus institutional rather than personal economic issues seem more influential on the relationship experiences in Chinese university dormitories. In this way, my research not only connects the relationship-based notions from the sociology of shared living with the field of HE student accommodation, but it also links them to a different HE residential context with an embeddedness of institutional factors.

Shared living in HE student residences

In the literature on shared living in HEIs, there are a range of discussions about life, including social relationships, in university residence halls not only in China but also in other countries where university student accommodation generally involves a form of shared residence. For instance, in the US, university dormitory rooms are usually single or shared by two to three people and sometimes roommates are assigned randomly. Such room sharing and random roommate allocation are quite like the Chinese situation. Focusing on college roommate relationships, there are several quantitative studies about the correlation

between roommate relationships and certain variables. For example, Carli and colleagues (Carli, Ganley and Pierce-Otay, 1991) found that similar personality types between college roommates would positively influence their satisfaction with roommate relationships. In research by Heckert and colleagues (Heckert *et al.*, 1999), however, there is less connection between roommates' similarity of personality and their relational satisfaction. Such a divergence is largely related to different measurements of personality and students' satisfaction. However, these contradictory arguments also reflect a partial and static understanding that describes potential connections between certain factors in roommate relationships, but cannot explain the reasons, context and development of these connections. As mentioned in the last chapter, much research of this sort can also be found in China, such as the connections between unhappy living experiences in dormitories and personal differences (e.g., Sun, 2014; Zhu and Zhu, 2011) and competition (Wang and Wang, 2014), but there are also insufficient explicit or micro explanations about why and how these connections influence roommate relationships.

Slightly different from most Chinese studies, which tend to attribute dormitory tensions to students' lack of adherence to collectivistic-oriented roommate relationships, research on college roommate relationships in the US demonstrates more diversified rationales. But some American researchers still tend to conceptualise roommate relationships in other fixed modes. For instance, in research by Hanasono and Nadler (2012, p. 627), randomly assigned first-year and single-gender roommate relationships at college are classified as “conventional” “functional” and “separate”, this typology is based on two pairs of interactional dialectics; one is “independence-dependence”, involving whether the roommates prefer personal independence and private space or being together and sharing personal belongings; another is ‘affection-instrumentality’, involving whether the relationship is maintained by unconditional affection and favour or instrumental considerations. Thus, according to their typology, roommate relationships with high levels of dependence and affection are conventional, those with high dependence and instrumentality are functional, while separate ones are related to high independence (Hanasono and Nadler, 2012). Through this typology and further quantitative investigations, the two researchers found that college roommates who prefer the same type of roommate relationship would have higher relational satisfaction, and students whose actual relational types meet with their ideal types would also have higher satisfaction with their roommate relationships (Hanasono and Nadler, 2012). Based on this typology and findings, Hanasono and Nadler (2012) noted that not all satisfactory roommate relationships are as intimate as they are traditionally thought to be - sometimes a lack of sharing and affection may also make some students happy. This notion

reflects a more comprehensive and critical perspective on college roommate relationships, but independence and dependence seem to be opposite to each other, as are affection and instrumentality. However, as discussed earlier, personal life and relationship practices may not be as simple and dualistic as suggested, instead, they can be multidimensional, non-linear and emotional (see for example, Holmes, 2010; Finn, 2015). Moreover, personal life in residence halls can also be understood in a relational web in which there can be various and fluid relationships and emotional negotiations (see for example, Smart, 2007). As for the connections between types and satisfaction, there seems to be less evidence for the causality of these connections, as noted by Hanasono and Nadler themselves (2012).

Other researchers have conceptualised college roommate relationships in a family mould. For example, research by Erb and colleagues (Erb *et al.*, 2014) is built upon the family systems theory which highlights the interdependence of family members and the mutual effects between family relationships and individuals, particularly their mental and behavioural situations (Cummings and Davies, 1994). Erb and colleagues (Erb *et al.*, 2014) applied this family-related theory to explain roommate relationships, due to the common features between the two sorts of relationship, which include living together, maintaining the same space, accumulating shared experiences, planning activities together and offering emotional and material support; underpinned by this conceptualization, the researchers mentioned that students' mental or behavioural problems caused by or shown in their roommate relationship negotiations can be treated or mediated according to the similar cases of family relationships, sometimes people could also link roommate-related issues to students' original family relationships. The research by Erb and colleagues reflects how associations between college students' mental health and their roommate relationships are as important as those in family life. However, not all the roommate relationships are as close or intimate as the researchers asserted. According to Hanasono and Nadler (2012), college roommate relationships can also be independence oriented. In this sense, although students live together and may have some interactions, they are not always like family members and thus may not necessarily have family-like mutual influence. The arguments of Erb and colleagues may draw their rationality from psychological or biological perspectives, but only conceptualising roommate relationships in this way limits understanding of roommate relationships and shared living between non-kin.

The two studies above are quite practical. Hanasono and Nadler (2012) aimed to offer some manageable standards for residence staff to understand students' relational preferences and satisfaction when assigning roommates and dealing with other roommate affairs. Erb and

colleagues (Erb *et al.*, 2014) aimed to provide student affairs professionals and counsellors with advice about the treatment or mediation of roommate-related issues and help students maintain good mental health. However, their fixed and static typology and conceptualization may reduce the availability of these suggestions to limited situations. Thus, to explore roommate relationships beyond the binary or restricted lens of collectivistic-oriented assumptions or static and fixed classifications or patterns, I discuss college dorm living through a relational gaze. In the relational webs which form the basis of relationship practices and selfhood (Finn, 2017b; Mason, 2004), the institutional and material environments where every day dorm living and roommates' interactions emerge and are negotiated are also stressed as key components. Thus, my project focuses not only on young people's relationships and emotional negotiations with their roommates, but also on the intertwining between these negotiations and their relations with their residential spaces and universities.

In discussions of HE student shared accommodation, Finn (2015) also mentioned the associations between sharers' intimacy and their use of certain material spaces of the shared dwelling. The connections between the social and spatial aspects of life experiences embody the relational perspective on HE highlighted by Finn (2015). On the other hand, they also reflect the significance of materials in shaping personal relationships in shared living. Similarly, researchers like Heath and colleagues (Heath *et al.*, 2017) and Smart (2007) also referred to the effects of material spaces and objects on relationship negotiations. In this way, materials may play important roles in personal life and relationship negotiations in shared living in HE, thus materiality may be essential to understandings and development of the relationality approach, including the sociology of friendships and shared living, with an engagement of HE debates. Therefore, below I review the literature of materiality to reflect on the associations among the notions above and how these relate to my research.

3.4 Materiality

Materiality of personal life and relationships

Smart (2007, pp. 166-167) noted that many possessions acquired in personal life "*come to embody to a greater or lesser degree elements of relationships*", but possessions are "*taken for granted and sometimes barely acknowledged*" except for their use value. Smart's (2007) arguments reflect the significance of material goods to refining personal relationships. They

also reveal the importance of understanding things from a social perspective and applying the materiality approach to exploring personal life and social relations.

Materiality highlights the mutual effects between people and things (Woodward, 2020) and opposes the dualism of objects and subjects (Miller, 2005). Underpinned by a material-oriented ontology, social relations are regarded as being simultaneously social and material and things are thought to play active roles in the materialisation of personhood and culture (Woodward, 2020). A similar notion was raised in Tilley's (1999) research on material culture, which asserts that things are actively and dialectically connected to the social conditions in which they exist. In other words, according to the rationale of materiality, people give certain meanings to materials under certain relational and sociocultural contexts; materials in turn may also influence people in their life. For instance, in research on the associations between the materiality of hair and the development of fashion in society, Holmes (2014) suggested how hair can be shaped by and affect the development of fashion styles and relevant industries. Apart from social research involving arts or history, similar notions showing the impacts of things to people are also underlined in research focusing on mundane life and social relationships. For example, through explorations of gift giving in the Netherlands, Komter (2001) noted that gifts may not always deliver the emotions or information the senders attach to them; sometimes they may be understood differently by the receiver if they perceive or feel differently about their relationships and the transacted things, reflecting multifaceted relations among these two parties and the gifts. On this basis, Komter (2001, p. 73) concluded that things are not just passive instruments for interpersonal exchanges, but they "*play a dynamic and active role in creating, maintaining, disturbing or destroying human relationships*". In this way, a materiality approach can help reveal the social meanings of material space and objects not just through their reflections of social relations, but also in how they shape these relations.

How personal life and relationships are associated with materials is also discussed in the research field of domestic living. For example, Hurdley (2006) demonstrates how displays of objects like a mantelpiece in a person's home reflects people's 'private' experience of self and how these are further associated with a kind of domestic culture in Britain – she illustrates the mutual embeddedness among personal life, self-identity and home objects in people's narratives about these displayed items. Hurdely's (2006) research not only reveals that the objects people display at home can form an important part of their life experience and their sense of home, but it also shows that telling stories about things can help evoke narratives about relevant experiences or cognitions. This methodological significance is

echoed by other researchers like Woodward (2016; 2020) in discussions of material methods in social research. In research exploring how “*passing on*” daily objects can influence kinship development, Holmes (2019, p. 187) demonstrates the important roles played by the objects’ “*material and sensory qualities*” in forming kin bonds in everyday practice, by which she illustrates the ties among “*kinship, relationality and materiality*”. Her research not only reflects the connections between personal relationships and things, but also constructs a conversation between the approach of relationality and materiality.

Bridging the bond between the relational and material lens and combining things with personal narratives are also concepts that are applied by domestic life studies in non-kin shared household contexts. For example, as suggested by Heath and colleagues (Heath *et al.*, 2017), some people like decorating their private bedrooms in their shared house by using stuffs which show their individual styles - they can obtain a sense of control and belonging from these objects and the decorated bedroom, which make them feel comfortable; on the other hand, the sharing of communal spaces and facilities like the kitchen and hallways, with the drying of clothes, or the sharing of food and chores could sometimes cause tension among sharers, due to their different approaches or disputes about cleaning; meanwhile, spending too much time in a private bedroom would show a lack of conviviality in shared living.

These arguments from Heath and colleagues (Heath *et al.*, 2017) demonstrate that the material space and objects in a shared residence can be influenced by but also shape the interactions and relationships among sharers in everyday domestic living; the intertwining between personal relationships and things can form both positive and negative living experiences for these people. The interweaving between the spatial and social aspects of shared living is also raised by Finn (2015), focusing on university student accommodation. Finn (2015) observes that staying in private rooms with the door closed for much of the time often signals to others a rejection of group solidarity, while openness of private spaces could always accelerate the establishment of deeper intimacy with other sharers.

The materiality of boundaries in shared living

The above associations between the openness of private rooms and sharers' relationships reflected by Finn (2015) also reveal the concept of boundaries in the materiality discussions in social research. Based on the literature review of boundary research in social science, Lamont and Molnar (2002) suggested that the studies on boundaries are widely conducted

in various fields of social science. Although these two researchers mainly gave examples in a macro sense like the social-class or national borders which focus on the differentiation between different groups or categories of people, their review highlighted that the boundaries are not fixed but can be changed or obscured and the boundary practices can involve not just separation but also interactions and ties between different parties (Lamont and Molnar, 2002). The dynamics and multidimension of boundaries argued by these two researchers are also emphasised in the relatively more micro and domestic field. For example, in the research exploring the music and teenage bedroom culture, Lincoln (2005) illustrated the instability of the public-private boundaries between the inside and outside of the bedrooms, revealing that the bedrooms can be spaces for both private and public activities.

In the studies focusing on household life, such a fluidity of the material boundaries is particularly linked to the personal relationships in the shared residence. For example, Sibley and Lowe (1992) argued that the issues about spatial boundaries in a household, including the crowdedness, communality or privacy of each space, can be managed by families living there in spatial design and daily use but can also reversely affect the family interactions and affinity in various ways. Such interrelations between the domestic spatial boundaries and personal relationship negotiations are also discussed in other family studies. For instance, Lewis (2011) observed the significance of using the bathroom with the door closed or locked to the relationship negotiations between teenagers and their parents. Lewis (2011) suggested that this practice can form a non-verbal communication to help teenagers show their needs for privacy and make parents understand their children's bodily and mental changes, which can be important to the development of family intimacy. According to the above studies, the domestic interactions and relationship experiences can be materialised as public-private boundaries in household spaces, these spatial boundaries involve not just static territories but more importantly the activities or actions about spatial arrangement and use which are of social significance.

The intertwined material and social negotiations in terms of public-private boundaries are also demonstrated in the discussions focusing on the non-kin shared residence, including student accommodation. For example, Holton (2016) stressed that keeping the material boundaries can be a pathway to manage the behaviours and spatial use in students' house sharing. He mainly discussed the interplay between housemates' estrangement and the closure of private bedrooms. Similar associations are also displayed by other researchers like Finn, but in more multifaceted ways. Finn (2015, p. 88) suggested that the

managements of the “*public and private spaces*” can form “*a process of othering*” and the sharers’ “*private rooms came to symbolise their (dis)connection to others with whom they lived*” through these spatial negotiations. The arguments regarding the public-private boundary establishment as a tie between the material spaces and social relationships are also presented in the research by Heath and colleagues. Apart from the alienation displayed by long-time staying alone in the personal bedroom which I previously examined, they also underlined that how the sharers keep their privacy, like ensuring the private rooms and time, involve what kind of social relationships they want to build and how they hold a sense of home in the shared living (Heath *et al.*, 2017). Based on these studies focusing on non-kin household sharing, the public-private boundaries in non-kin shared living are not only spatial but also interpersonal boundaries. How people manage the public-private boundaries are related to how they treat the communality of the shared living and how intimate they want to be with other sharers.

Applying a materiality approach to Chinese HE roommate relationship research

The associations between personal life and materials like those discussed above - particularly those discussed by Heath and colleagues (Heath *et al.*, 2017) and Finn (2015) - also exist in Chinese university dormitories. Moreover, in some Chinese literature mentioned earlier, some roommate conflicts are triggered by practices like using public items or dormitory cleaning, related to certain material spaces or objects, but these conflicts are still frequently explained as a result of students’ lack of solidarity, without further reference to these spaces or objects (Liang, 2008; Gao, 2013). Therefore, it is significant to use a materiality approach, including the lens focusing on the domestic public-private boundaries, to broaden the explorations of the interplay between roommate relationships and the materials in shared living spaces in Chinese college student dormitories.

In addition, although material-related suggestions are mentioned in research by Heath and colleagues (Heath *et al.*, 2017) and Finn (2015), these researchers did not further develop their discussions, especially in terms of the interplay between people and things (Woodward, 2020). Furthermore, the concept of boundaries I discussed before is mainly applied in residential environments where there are separate rooms or at least independent bedrooms, but how the relevant practices work in a more extreme environment with high spatial communality is less observed. Thus, my research further explores and extends these materiality-related notions to reflect on the more multidimensional roles that material space and objects can play in young people’s relationships and emotional negotiations in such a

rule-bound and highly shared residence and how these help form their material experiences and a kind of domestic culture in dormitories (Tilley, 1999; Hurdley, 2006).

Another crucial influence of materials on individuals is that they could be used in fieldwork to help people draw out certain perceptions or experiences which would otherwise be ignored (Woodward, 2020). Thus, drawing on Woodward's (2020) work on photo elicitation and Gabb's (2008) work on emotion maps, which link family emotional exchanges with spaces of the house, my research applies material-related methods to help manifest or embody personal thinking and explorations, particularly often hidden ones. In this sense, my research also builds upon the personal life and relationship studies in which materials are considered in methods design, like those by Heath and colleagues (Heath *et al.*, 2017), Hurdley (2006) and Holmes (2019), applying the narratives and images about mundane or domestic materials to the shared student dorm settings in Chinese universities. Methodological issues will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Conclusion

In general, I formed the fundamental rationale of my research by building on three main themes: 1) the notions about students' personal life and relationships in higher education; 2) relationality approach including its implications in the sociology of friendships and shared living, focusing on the relational, dynamic and critical lens in personal relationship exploration, in particular in interactions and relationships in shared residential settings; and 3) materiality approach highlighting the interrelations between personal relationships and materials, including space and objects.

According to current literature, studies about mass higher education and its influence on university life both in China and the Global North seem to focus more on social inequalities. However, a wider academic gaze encompassing especially to university life research is needed. To bridge the gap, there is a need for exploration from the perspective of focusing on personal experiences and relationships themselves. Thus, the relationality and relational perspective is drawn on in my research, to explore the connections between personal relationships and wider contexts, starting with the relationships rather than being limited by a dualistic notion in that context. Closely related to relationality and shared living debates, the importance of the context and dynamic of personal relationships is also highlighted in the main sociological debates on friendships. Moreover, the concept of critical associations from the sociology of friendships also offers an open and creative rationale which challenges the

idealised or assumed understandings of roommate relationships and HE friendships found in current literature.

In the field of shared living, many studies of student life in university residential halls in other countries like the US demonstrate a limited rationale. Many researchers tend to focus on quantitative correlations between roommate relationships and certain variables; some are restricted by a fixed pattern or standard to categorise or conceptualise roommate relationships but neglect the complexity and fluidity of personal life and relationship negotiations. However, some shared living studies offer more multifaceted and relational views on people's various practices and relationship and emotional experiences in shared households. The approach of materiality is also useful to explore the often-ignored relational meanings of things in daily life. Meanwhile, things are not just utilised or influenced by people, but can also shape personal relationships, which also reflects the significance of considering materials in relationship exploration.

The conceptual framework of my research is constructed by drawing on and building dialogues between the concepts of students' social experiences in mass higher education, "*relational perspectives*" (Finn, 2015, p. 32), "*critical associations*" (Heaphy and Davies, 2012, p. 311), social relationships in non-kin shared living and the materiality of social relationships. Underpinned by the above rationales, I began my micro and qualitative empirical work, the process of carrying out this work is discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 4 Methodology

Introduction

This chapter examines the methodological approach taken in my research. It discusses the rationales of the research design and the process through which I conducted my fieldwork and analysed the data. I conducted a document analysis of public-facing digital platforms for ten Chinese universities in relation to their policies and public statements about student dormitories and roommate relationships, some of which was discussed in Chapter 2. I used qualitative interviews and visual methods to investigate dorm living and roommate relationships of Chinese young people who are experiencing or have experienced dorm living in Chinese universities. This research is neither purely deductive or inductive, it was based on the conceptual framework discussed in Chapter 3 but it also formed some new concepts. In the process of research design, data collection and analysis, I also considered and dealt with relevant issues like sampling and recruitment, ethics, reflexivity and positionality, which are also discussed in this chapter.

This chapter consists of five sections. In the first section, it details the sampling and access process and provides an overview of my participants. Then it discusses the methods I applied in this project. It explains why and how I employed a mixed qualitative approach consisting of document analysis, visual methods (photography and emotion mapping) and semi-structured interviews. The next section relates to managing the data, including the translations, coding and thematic analysis I applied in this process. Then the chapter explores the ethical issues involved in my project. Finally, the chapter discusses reflexivity and positionality, particularly showing how my identity as both a researcher and someone with similar university dorm living experiences played a role in my relationships with my participants and the progress of my fieldwork.

4.1 Sampling and Participant Overview

Participant sampling and recruitment

The core sampling strategy of my project is purposive sampling which is usually thought to be more flexible and discretionary for researchers and thus can help them recruit more targeted participants to fit the research aims (Shipman, 1997). Based on my research objectives, my empirical work focused on young people who are experiencing or have

experienced dormitory living in Chinese universities. The participants in my research are divided into two main groups: current undergraduates (by the time of interviews) and those who have graduated from Chinese universities. As discussed in previous chapters, my research is theoretically underpinned by the concept of relationality, highlighting the nonlinear dynamics of personal relationships and emotions and their integration with time and space (Finn, 2015). Graduate participants have experienced the whole process of university dorm living, thus they are relatively more likely to reflect richer or more complete dorm living experiences throughout the whole university period and even the possible echo in their subsequent everyday life, which were expected to promote my explorations from the dynamic and temporal lens. Graduate participants' narratives of their dorm memories were applied to enrich my explorations of these young people's emotional experiences in dorm living and the possible emotional shifts, emphasising the role of memory as they look back on their experiences (Smart, 2007). In addition, the accounts of graduate participants were supposed to display more multifaceted everyday dorm living and roommate relationship negotiations, particularly in certain aspects which the current undergraduates may not be willing to expand upon due to the potential pressures in shared living, like the institutional context of their universities or negative experience. Since memories are contextual (Smart, 2007), students' narratives of their experiences as undergraduates might be influenced by their post-university lives. Therefore, I recruited two types of graduate participants: graduate participants living in the UK, and those based in China, to explore the impacts of university dorm living and roommate relationships on individuals over time, even beyond the university years.

In this research, all the participants were supposed to be home students at Chinese universities, because international students' residence is different. The participants include both men and women. Moreover, I initially planned to recruit ten people for each of the three participant groups. For current students, through purposive sampling I attempted to build diverse samples by inviting students from a range of courses, years of study, institutions and locations, as these diverse issues are thought to be influential to students' everyday life and personal relationships in dormitories. Meanwhile, I avoided recruiting those who are currently roommates, due to the risk that this could cause or exacerbate tensions, particularly as my research could involve the discussion of negative experiences.

For the graduate participants, I tried to recruit those who had graduated no more than 10 years ago, in consideration of the accuracy of memories. The graduate participants include both people who have entered work and those who are continuing their education. For those

basing in the UK, using convenience sampling means that the initial recruits were from Sheffield. The participants were recruited mainly through my personal student and professional networks. Additionally, I also made posts for my project to introduce myself and the project and gave them away during the recruitment process. I also prepared payment for a boost or guarantee for full participation. While some participants accepted payment, others took part in the research voluntarily. Some participants also helped me conduct snow-ball sampling to recruit more people to my project.

Participants overview

The resulting sample comprised 30 participants in my fieldwork: 16 graduate participants, half based in the UK and half in China; and 14 participants who are current undergraduates. Half of all respondents in each group are female and half male. All the participants are Chinese. As mentioned above, all the participants took part in interviews and completed emotion maps, but those who offered dorm photos were mainly current undergraduates. Detailed demographic information, including basic information of the dormitory of every participant, is shown in the Appendix 6 (for the demographic sheets, see Appendix 5), some simple points of which are displayed in the following tables:

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Year of Graduation
Minglian Nie	25	Male	2017
Cheng Jiang	25	Male	2017
Feng Wu	31	Male	2012
Anli Li	26	Female	2016
Lin Jin	31	Male	2012
Yanli Jiang	30	Female	2012
Yang Yang	23	Female	2019
Mei Hu	23	Female	2020

Table 2: Basic information for graduate participants based in the UK

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Year of Study
Mo Yu	21	Female	3 rd year
Wei Song	21	Male	3 rd year
Huan Lan	22	Male	3 rd year
Jun Tian	18	Male	1 st year
Ying Zhang	18	Male	1 st year
Yoyo Deng	20	Female	1 st year
Yuanda Wen	19	Male	1 st year
Mingyu Wang	20	Male	2 nd year
Wanyin Cao	21	Female	3 rd year
Yingying Tang	20	Female	3 rd year
Zhen Ye	20	Male	2 nd year
Bing Gu	20	Female	1 st year
Yi Su	19	Male	1 st year
Yongming Liu	21	Male	3 rd year

Table 3: Basic information for graduate participants based in China

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Year of Study
Ding Ma	25	Male	2018
Tong Chang	29	Female	2015
Jianning Zhu	30	Female	2014
Pei Han	31	Female	2012
Sheng Luo	31	Male	2012
Boju Fu	28	Male	2015
Yusheng Guan	27	Female	2017
Yaping Huang	27	Male	2018

Table 4: Basic information for participants who are current undergraduates

4.2 Qualitative Research Approach

This project uses a qualitative design. As discussed in the previous two chapters, there is a wide range of quantitative research on university roommate relationships in both China and the US and quantitative methods are not rare in the studies of college students' shared living in other countries. Through relatively more structured measurements, quantitative approaches helped previous explorations to show connections between various factors and college students' evaluations of interactions in shared university accommodations, which thus demonstrated this communal life and its relationships in a way often thought to be "*hard, rigorous and reliable*" (Bryman, 1988, p. 103). However, my research explores this shared living and sharer's relationships through a qualitative approach.

According to Manning and Kunkel (2014), qualitative research provides the opportunity to find seemingly contradictory concepts at play and assess how various ideas or actions depend on context and their changes or development over time. By applying qualitative strategies which are usually more open, my research tended to show college roommate relationships by reflecting their deep, multifaceted and dynamic nature (Bryman, 1988). In this way, my project revealed how there can be various influential factors at work in college roommates' relationships and emotional experiences in the micro lifeworld, how these influences can be non-linear and contextual and can intertwine and change over time, as outlined by Manning and Kunkel (2014).

A qualitative approach helps to assess the complexity of college roommates' everyday life and their relevant practices, experiences and places that are always taken for granted as being 'obvious' (Silverman, 2013, p. 1), particularly their negotiations of roommate relationships and dormitory spaces. This helped me conduct my project with a focus on how young people feel about their residential environment and everyday interactions with those in close proximity in university dormitories and approach them in these through three-dimensional ways, unlike in previous studies (see Chapters 1 and 2).

Therefore, a qualitative approach is the most appropriate design for my project to address my research questions. The explicit design and practices of data collection and analysis are supported by the constructionist-oriented ontological position and an interpretivist-oriented epistemological stance, highlighting interactions, understandings and the interpretation process (Flick, 2014; Mason, 2002). As I mentioned before, the empirical work in my research was theoretically based on the existing conceptual framework, but it was also influenced by the grounded theory, applying an inductive logic and focusing on the concepts

that emerge from the data (Guetterman *et al.*, 2019). To reflect on the complexity and flexibility of college roommates' interactions and perceptions on their shared dorm living and how these interrelate with the institutional and material environment and other relevant contexts, my project applied different qualitative methods: document analysis, visual methods including photography and emotion maps, and in-depth semi-structured interviews. The data collected through each method focus on different aspects of the young people's dorm living and roommate relationship experiences.

Document analysis of university webpages enabled me to understand university policies, procedures and the ways of constructing roommate relationships. The data generated through document analysis were combined and integrated with qualitative interviews and visual methods with university students and graduates. This triangulation emphasises the connections between different perspectives of knowledge and offers complementary explanations for the researched issues (Flick, 2018). In this sense, such a mix of research strategies and rich datasets also promoted the dialogue my project tries to build among different academic fields, as discussed in Chapter 3. In the following subsections, after an overall outline of the research design and methods of my research, I discuss why and how I applied each of these methods to develop my explorations and answer the research questions.

Research design and methods

In my project, I combined document analysis on the official websites and other main official virtual information platforms of ten Chinese universities with qualitative interviews and visual methods, including photography and emotion maps, with 30 Chinese young people with university dorm living experiences. The results of the document analysis were outlined in Chapter 2 and the findings from the qualitative research with students and graduates are outlined in the two forthcoming chapters. The ten Chinese universities were selected based on their geographical locations and positions in the Chinese HEI hierarchy. Thus, the geographical distribution of these universities covers different areas in China. Similarly, these universities were selected from various hierarchical positions ranging from the top to the ordinary level, and were those universities where it was relatively easier to find and access dorm-related information on their digital platforms. The themes of the analysed documents are related to both rules and propaganda, focusing on the regulations and display of undergraduates' residences and roommate relationships.

Alongside document analysis, I conducted semi-structured interviews, along with visual methods, with 30 participants including both men and women. The participants were recruited through my personal student and professional pathways. The interviews focused on participants' personal experiences and relevant perceptions of their relationships and emotional negotiations in college dorm living. In terms of visual methods, I invited participants to take photos of the spaces and/or objects in their dorms and draw emotion maps to show their emotional experiences in certain dorm spaces. The photos and emotion maps were discussed in the interviews – some emotion maps were completed during the interviews. These visual data are not just elicitation for interviews but they also formed independent datasets along with interview transcripts. Both the university documents I analysed and the interviews were in Chinese. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the entire fieldwork was conducted online, more details of which are outlined later in this chapter. Through the document analysis, interviews and visual methods, I collected textual datasets from the documents and interview transcripts and visual datasets from participants' dormitory photos and emotion maps. I applied a thematic analysis approach to data analysis, assisted by NVivo mainly on interview transcripts.

Document analysis

As noted above, I analysed the main policies and publicity about undergraduate accommodation and roommate relationships on the official websites and other digital platforms of ten Chinese universities. These universities were selected from different levels of Chinese HEIs' hierarchy. As discussed in Chapter 2, the hierarchical positions can be influenced by and also impact a HEI's educational resources, construction and its students' competitiveness in study and employment (see Wu, 2005). I also noted in Chapter 2 that most Chinese regular HEIs are geographically located in the south, east and middle of the country, where there are larger populations and more developed economies (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021). In this context, I planned to select universities for document analysis from each hierarchical level and various geographical areas including both regions with more regular HEIs and those with less, for the sake of the diversity of data and a more comprehensive picture of the universities' perceptions and management of students' shared dorm living and roommate relationships. The university documents I analysed are published official documents from private sources (Bryman, 2012; Scott, 1990). In this sense, the documents derived from a university can manifest the university's own management or stance on students' shared dormitories and roommate relationships. In my analysis, these institutional arrangements or attitudes were generated from the documents of

each individual university, but they were then compared to find possible common points or distinctions. On this basis, I could explore whether and how these universities with various hierarchical positions and geographical locations and relevant contexts are similar or different in conceiving and presenting student residence.

Two of these universities I selected were those where many of my current undergraduate participants are studying, which made a stronger link between the textual data generated from these university documents and the datasets from interviews and visual methods with students. Moreover, accessibility also influenced my selection: on some universities' virtual platforms there are many limits on access to information or certain pages related to undergraduate accommodation or roommate relationships, which made it hard to conduct analysis, thus these sites were excluded. In this sense, my selection of these universities was also based on the approach of convenience sampling. For the confidentiality of participants' personal information and the coherence of the overall dataset collected from document analysis, all the universities I selected use the pseudonym of '*capital letter + University*'. The basic profiles of these universities can be seen in Table 1 in Chapter 2.

Although documents act as important data sources for sociological research, Prior (2003) raised the problem that documents are often thought to be just a tool for people's thinking and actions and thus more scholars tend to focus superficially and statically on what these documents contain rather than these documents themselves or their further relations with the wider contexts. On this basis, Prior (2003) further argued that how the documents are produced and play roles in certain situations are as significant as their content and she especially highlighted the importance of documents' functions to human actions. As a type of non-reactive approach in which the existence of a data source is not specifically for social research and there is no interaction between the researcher and the researched (Scott, 1990; Bryman, 2012), document analysis is thought to be restricted less by such a "*reactive effect*" and can ensure the validity of data in this sense (Bryman, 2012, p. 543). In this way, document analysis is as valuable as other methods in reflecting the world under research, including the organisations that generated the documents. As mentioned by Bryman (2012), these documents can to some extent display the social, organisational and even cultural or spiritual realities of the organisations from which they derive.

Aligning with the above notions about the significance of document analysis, my research applied document analysis to Chinese universities' official documents about student residences, including dorm living and roommate relationships. Analysing these official

documents helped me explore how these universities' policies conceive and present shared living and social relationships in student dormitories. On the virtual platforms of the selected universities, I searched for available documents about university dormitories and roommate relationships by visiting the pages of certain departments and keyword searching. In the analysis process, I did not just consider what was shown in these documents, but also took account of these files' types or properties, their relations to the institutional and cultural environment of the universities from which they derived, and the wider policy and sociocultural contexts about college students' shared dorm living in China. I also paid attention to these documents' functions in the universities' management of student dorms and students' mundane dorm living. On these bases, my analysis did not just focus on regulations, but on other types of documents, which mainly included rule explanations (often in the pattern of FAQs), introductions or guidelines of dorm spaces, facilitates and residential life, reports or blogs about events or stories involving dorm living and roommate relationships. The various document types do not just reflect how students' shared living and social relationships in dorms are regulated by universities, but also reveal how they are presented by these universities. Documents with the property of publicity, like reports of roommate friendships or introductions of dorm spaces, illustrate what these universities advocate or promote in terms of student residence.

As mentioned earlier, the documents I analysed were all accessed through virtual pathways. Analysing website documents has been applied in sociological research on education. For example, Waters and Brooks (2014) explored internationalisation and segregation in elite schools in England by analysing the geographical representations shown in several schools on their websites and other open-to-public documents like blogs and Twitter feeds. Through interpreting the texts and images the schools used to promote themselves online, the researchers further illustrated the sense of isolation in the culture or spirit of these schools (Waters and Brooks, 2014). Underpinned by the same approach, the two researchers discussed in other research about the internationalism revealed in British elite school's online representations, in which they also highlighted the significances of websites and prospectuses in showing how schools promote themselves to prospective pupils and how this connects to broader prominent discourses (Brooks and Waters, 2015).

Similar rationales were also applied in Lažetić's (2018) research focusing on (potential) students' portraits as consumers or academic beginners reflected through the websites of higher educational institutions, based on the idea that institutional websites are important in positioning the identities of institutions and students and constructing communications

between the two parties. These studies demonstrated that websites and other relevant digital information platforms of educational institutions are of significance for the public to understand the general status of these institutions in certain ways, particularly how they think of and treat their students. Moreover, these sources reveal not just displays or descriptions of institutional circumstances or statements but more importantly the engagement of wider fields like culture, notions or discourses within and outside of universities.

Like these website studies, my research analysed virtually posted words including rules, the sentences in guidelines or notices, narratives in reports or roommate stories and slogans. I analysed pictures including photos or figures used in introducing the dorm rooms and surroundings, those showing residential life including roommates, dorm decorations or relevant activities, and cartoons or paintings helping to explain the documents to which they are attached. I interpreted the information reflected in these texts and images, then I analysed the further institutional and conceptual meanings, revealing the policy and cultural contexts related to student dormitories and roommate relationships in universities. Building on this, I analysed the associations between these university-constructed contexts and the wider policy and sociocultural environment I illustrated in Chapter 2. In this way, I analysed the manufactured context of these university digital documents in a broader lens, based on the role played by these documents in linking college students' everyday shared living and relationships in dormitories to the broader policy, ideological and cultural fields at and beyond the university level.

I analysed how these university documents relate to the everyday practices and experiences of students, placing data generated from qualitative interviews alongside that generated from documents in my analysis (Rapley, 2011). While the university discourse visible on the webpages were outlined in Chapter 2, I discussed their effects on students' behaviours, thinking and relationship negotiations in communal dorms in the upcoming chapters. Furthermore, although these university documents were analysed in my research to reflect the organisational context of university students' dorm living and there are some situations or fragments of students' everyday dorm living and roommate relationships particularly displayed in publicity-related documents, it was necessary to consider the transparency of such information, as they might be influenced by other factors like their purpose and potential audiences and thus should be combined with other sources of evidences to probe their reality (Atkinson and Coffey, 2011). In this sense, it was significant to engage other methods and relevant data to the empirical work along with document analysis to shed light

on the reality of young people's dorm living and how they are organised and managed by universities.

Carrying out document analysis on universities' virtual platforms was necessary for my research to conduct a deep and explicit contextual exploration of shared undergraduate residences and college roommates' social relationships. Through this approach, my research reflected how Chinese universities perceive and arrange communal residential life for their students in spatial, organisational and conceptual aspects in general. Analysing these virtual documents not only helped me answer the first research question, but also formed a key context for the answers to the next two research questions. On this basis, the production, contents and effects of these documents were interconnected in the empirical process (Prior, 2003). They played roles throughout by addressing all the three research questions and again revealing the significance of document analysis to the methodological mix in my research.

In the following sections, I reflect on other methods applied by my research – first up is visual methods. Although images, especially photos are often related to or even regarded as a kind of document (Mason, 2002), how they were collected and analysed as a dataset in my research was also underpinned by methodological notions from a visual perspective.

Visual methods

I applied two types of visual methods in my research: photography, focusing on capturing and discussing images of certain spaces or objects in the dormitory; and emotion maps, representing participants' emotional experiences in various dorm spaces. Visual methods can be effective pathways for social analyses focusing on young people's life experiences and thinking with embedded spatial or material-based discussions (see for example, Heath *et al.*, 2012). The engagement of images, particularly those made by participants themselves, can not only help highlight their active positions and sense of control in data generation but also guarantee the dominance of these young people's voices in the research process (Heath *et al.*, 2012). Images are also thought to be helpful to articulate information which may be difficult for participants to clearly express in words or construct in narratives (Bagnoli, 2009), particularly regarding negative emotions or micro experience in the lifeworld (Heath *et al.*, 2012; Keats, 2009; Ball and Smith, 1992).

In the mixed application of visual methods and interview, images - particularly photos - are often thought to be prompts for interviewees to explain certain issues or elicit narratives (Heath *et al.*, 2012; Rose, 2016; Prosser and Schwartz, 1998). The hybrid application of visual methods and interview in my research enriched the overall picture of the materiality, spatiality and emotionality of college roommate relationships and sharpened the understanding of these complex phenomena, especially emotional experiences (Rose, 2016; Gabb and Pink, 2015). This multi-layered empirical strategy is also reflected in the mix of visual methods. Although the focuses of photography and emotion maps are slightly different, mixing these visual techniques helped me conduct a multifaceted visual exploration with insights into young people's everyday shared living, particularly in terms of their materiality, based on multifaceted but interwoven aspects (Mason, 2011).

Furthermore, the application of visual methods highlights the importance of space and things in people's social life in public or private fields. For example, Harper (2012) illustrated how people's progressive social life is interwoven with the wider spaces of farms and a piazza with the help of various photos from different angles. Such studies reflect the interrelations between people's social and spatial experiences, demonstrating that spaces are not just the sites of social actions or relations but also meaningful parts of social life and can dynamically intertwine with social identities and relationships (Valentine, 2004). Assisted by participant-made photos, Morrison (2013) analysed the interplay among domestic objects, homemaking experiences and negotiations of heterosexual identities in the household life of heterosexual couples in New Zealand, emphasising the active roles played by things in the social world and the materiality of social relations (Woodward, 2020).

The advantages mentioned above echo those I experienced in my own research. On one hand, visual methods helped me to explore the everyday dorm living and social negotiations from the perspectives of students, updating understanding of Chinese undergraduates' accommodation and roommate relationships by prioritising young people's own experiences and voices. In addition, the images helped many participants clearly explain their dorm living and relationship experiences, particularly those involving complex emotional negotiations and sensory experiences. The making and discussion process also reminded some participants of certain feelings or memories of their lived experiences. Thus, the visual strategies helped my participants coherently narrate what they had experienced and how they felt in their everyday shared living to help me explore these young people's micro life, relationships and emotions. This function is explicitly shown in the subsequent sections. Meanwhile, as discussed in Chapter 3, the concept of materiality is an important part of the

conceptual framework of my research and is central to my third research question. Therefore, visual methods which stress the ideas of materiality fit my research and they helped me address how the social relationships in shared dorm living are shaped by the material residential environment, discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

However, visual data collected in my research, particularly emotion maps, were not just used for elicitation or illustration but also for independent analysis, as they can constitute specific datasets alongside the textual data. Analysing these different datasets generated complementary answers to my research questions, explaining how these young people negotiate social relationships in everyday life in the shared dormitories. Therefore, more than a part of interviews, a visual approach was applied in my research as one of the key data generation pathways and an important process wherein part of the core findings emerged. How the two types of visual methods were applied in my project is discussed below.

Photography

The interrelations between people and things are often hard to notice in daily life (Miller, 2005). To demonstrate such interplays, photographs are often thought to be useful, as they can be applied in interviews to draw out narratives, memories or comments about the experiences, relations or feelings that would possibly be ignored by participants otherwise (e.g., Prosser and Schwartz, 1998; Banks, 2007; Woodward, 2020). As asserted by Harper (2002) from the perspective of enhancing communications, photo elicitation can help construct common understandings of interview questions between the researcher and participants and make in-depth communications run more smoothly. As a project underpinned by the idea of materiality and aiming at exploring the micro everyday life in university student dormitories, my research also used photos to elicit conversations with participants and encourage their contribution to my research.

In my fieldwork, before each interview, I gave every participant a brief verbal introduction to the photography activity and sent everyone written guidelines (see Appendix 7) with more detailed guidance. Participants were invited to take or find photos of their dormitories involving the spaces or objects that were significant to them or that they wanted to show me for any reason, which would then be talked about during the interview. They were notified that the number and contents of the photo(s) depended on them, but there could not be any person in the photos. Graduate participants were also invited to send me any photos of their

dormitories that they might have taken during their university experiences. However, most graduates could not offer dorm photos, as they no longer lived in university dorms or they had not saved any photo which matched my requirements. In such cases, I showed them some dormitory photos I selected from the Internet during the interviews to help them remember and discuss their dormitories and dorm living experiences (see Appendix 11).

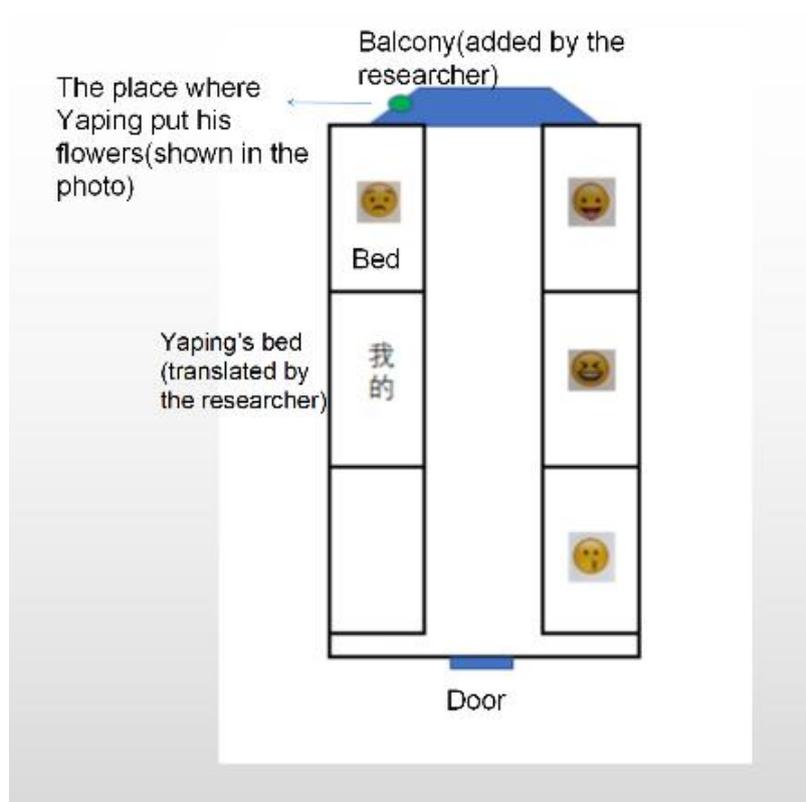
Considering the possible influence or limits these researcher-offered photos may bring to participants' memories or discussions, I tried to make the selected images as diverse as possible and avoided extra guidance or direction when showing them these photos. Instead, I ensured that participants played the leading roles in discussing these photos and their relevant memories. This empowerment was especially emphasised when participants talked about the photos they offered, confirming that they are the "expert" to introduce their photos and narrate relevant stories or emotions to the researcher (Rose, 2016, p. 316). As the researcher, I mainly asked questions like why they took or offered those photos and how they felt about the things they displayed. Most photos can be found in Chapter 6 and the Appendix 9.

Emotion maps

Emotion mapping is a type of mapping method that has been effectively used to explore understandings of space and place (Heath *et al.*, 2012). Gabb's (2008) research on family intimacy and domestic space used emotion maps as a creative method to build a new way of expressing the relations between emotions and spaces. By using several emoticons tags showing different facial expressions in different areas of the household floor plans, the participants in Gabb's (2008) research reflected various emotional exchanges that happened within the family in different spaces of their houses, which further demonstrated the associations between families' interactions and relationships and their material residential experience. Following Gabb's methodology idea, my research applied emotion maps to explore how young people's social, emotional and spatial experiences interweave in their everyday shared dorm living. By drawing emotion maps, they documented their emotional experiences of particular spaces – the maps and photos worked together to show the associations between roommate relationships and their material space in a more comprehensive way.

Participants were given instructions prior to their interviews (see Appendix 7) and were invited to draw simple floor plans of their dormitories. At the same time, each of them was offered a chart of emoticon/feelings stickers with various colours which could be put on the floor plan to represent different roommates and the associated emotions in different areas of the dormitory. Like Gabb (2008), I also applied emoticons, but I further extended it by using more than four types, as emoticons now constitute a whole range of language in communication and expressing emotions, compared to the situation in 2008. I offered 48 emoticons which are popular on the main Chinese social media platforms like WeChat, to help participants express their emotions more accurately and reduce their sense of unfamiliarity with this activity. Moreover, I also expected to collect more vibrant emotional expressions and experiences through this method. Participants were told that they could complete the maps in advance and then talk about these with me during the interview or they could also make and talk about the maps at the same time during the interviews. Given that this method may not be as familiar as interviews and photography to participants, I tried to make the introduction and guidelines as clear and simple as possible. Although every participant was willing to take part in this activity and some clearly showed interest in it, most drew their maps during the interview and many asked for more guidance or assistance from me.

As highlighted by Varga-Atkins and O'Brien (2009), when guiding participants to finish a graphic task in research, the researcher should make sure there is a balanced task structure which is neither too open nor too restrictive to participants. Because almost all the fieldwork activities were conducted online due to the pandemic, almost all the emotion maps were virtual files made through Microsoft PowerPoint or other graphics programmes, thus I shared my screen with these participants to help them complete their emotion maps. In some cases, I drew the floor plans and sometimes also put emoticons in certain areas according to their step-by-step descriptions and selections. They could check, change and guide my actions, as we could edit the same document at the same time. During this process, I offered necessary assistance in respect of techniques of making the maps and tried to avoid influencing their selection, letting them take the lead, echoing the advantages of participant-made photography for allowing participants to control the encounter (Rose, 2016). To ensure this nature, I tried to let participants guide me rather than being adverse during the mapping process. However, completing the emotion maps together also further consolidated the function of this visual method in prompting communications between the participants and me in interviews. Most emotion maps I collected are shown in Chapter 6 and the Appendix 10, but an example can be found below:



Map 1: Emotion map from Yaping Huang (male, graduate)

Semi-structured interviews

As suggested by May (2011), qualitative interviews are often thought to be useful to elicit rich insight into biographies, experiences and subjective understanding of participants. Thus, I used interviews to explore participants' personal experiences, emotions and thoughts about shared dorm living. Furthermore, although these in-depth interviews were prompted by visual data from the two methods discussed above, they in turn helped deeply probe the visual data, forming an interplay between these methods and developing the exploration in a multidimensional way. In other words, although visual methods can creatively contribute rich and independent data to the research, the unilateral interpretation of these photos and maps without any communication with participants could lead to loss of important information and misunderstandings.

The interviews were semi-structured and the main themes discussed with current undergraduates and graduates were slightly different. The provisional themes for current undergraduates mainly focused on everyday dorm living, negotiations in roommate relationships and the roles played by the institutional environment and material dorm spaces.

For graduate participants, the themes mainly focused on their memories of dormitory living and roommate relationships, the roles played by material spaces and institutional environment and evolution of relationships over time. Interviews were initially intended to be online or face-to-face and last for about 1 hour. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, all interviews were adapted to be conducted online apart from the pilot which was conducted prior to the implementation of restrictions. These online interviews were done over video or audio calls through virtual communication software including Tencent and Zoom. Participants were allowed to select the methods they preferred.

I made original interview schedules (see Appendix 1) for both these groups and then did a pilot interview with a graduate participant based in the UK, Minglian Nie. Then I made some modifications to the schedules according to issues and thoughts that emerged during the pilot. Because Minglian and I were in the same city, this pilot interview began face-to-face in a park, but it was paused and then moved online, because both of us felt uncomfortable doing a face-to-face interview with anti-epidemic measures like maintaining social distance. Due to this experience, all the following interviews were conducted remotely. Meanwhile, I adjusted the structure of the interview schedule based on this pilot interview, deleting some questions which were unnecessary or repetitive and merging questions that were similar, particularly those related to everyday interactions in dorm living. I also rephrased certain questions which confused Minglian, to make them more straightforward. In addition to the changes to the interview schedule, I also gained experience and lessons about interviewing skills, like encouraging participants to provide more details in their narratives of personal experiences. I took notes of these communication skills as references for the subsequent interviews.

All the interviews were audio recorded with participants' permission. Before each interview, I made an informal contact with the participant to say 'hello', introduce my research, including the involved activities and ethical issues, and to confirm the interview date and tool with the participant. I tested the communication tool selected by the participant in advance of the interview to make sure it worked. In the interview, one participant selected a video call through WeChat, but the connection was poor, so we quickly changed to another tool and successfully finished the interview. However, communication in these interviews generally went smoothly through the online approach. Most interviews lasted around 2 hours.

4.3 Managing the Data

Data translation

As a result of the interviews and visual methods, I obtained 30 interview transcripts, 34 emotion maps and 47 photos from participants. Interviews were conducted in Chinese and translated to English. A key and the most challenging part of this work was translating part of or the whole Chinese transcripts to English, particularly in the coding process, and then discussing some of them with English theoretical ideas in the thesis. Translation is a kind of interpretation influenced by the sociocultural contexts of the two languages on the one hand, and the nature of research and translators' backgrounds on the other - its results will in turn affect the subsequent data analyses and outcomes (Wong and Poon, 2010). For instance, Wong and Poon (2010) discussed various translation results of one Cantonese idiom based on distinctive research aims. Similarly, in research by Amer and colleagues (Amer *et al.*, 2016), translating metaphors was a big challenge, which is thought to be a cultural rather than linguistic issue - it is not enough to simply use equivalent words as it can cause the loss of the original meaning. These researchers also found that the loss of meaning in one phase may negatively impact the following phases, due to their close connections.

Thus, being flexible to maintain the original meaning is of significant importance to translation. In my research, I applied more than one translation programme and dictionary and referred to relevant literature about certain concepts both in Chinese and English to reduce possible misunderstandings. I also sought help from people with professional translation knowledge or cross-cultural backgrounds on certain issues like grammar or expression and translation tools. Furthermore, I kept my focus on the research questions and aims throughout the translation process. As recommended by Nes and colleagues (Nes *et al.*, 2010), for those who analyse data in another language than their own, staying in the original language as long and much as possible is useful for avoiding possible limitations in the analysis. In accordance with this argument and considering research efficiency, my translation work concentrated more on clearly expressing and discussing the findings originally emerging from the Chinese context in English rather than translating every word, to strike a balance between protecting the original meanings from being lost and making them understandable to English-speaking audiences. Thus, the translations were elective according to analysis and writing needs.

Coding and thematic analysis

The data analysis approach employed in my research is thematic analysis. To begin with, I made an initial general reading of both the visual data and the interview texts. Initial general reading was employed by Keats (2009) in her research of vicarious witnessing in which she had to analyse multiple types of data, including images and interview texts. Similarly, Rose (2016) emphasised reading through all datasets to get a general understanding of their meanings and find focuses for further exploration before specifically analysing different types of datasets. In my research, I read through the interview transcripts, photos and emotion maps as well as the relevant notes and memos I made during the data collection process to build an initial dialogue with these data.

Based on the general reading and combined with the research questions, I obtained an initial knowledge of my participants' stories including what they told me in the photos and maps. In advance and during this process, I also created three extended case studies from the interviews and visual data (with Wei Song, Mingyu Wang and Anli Li), in which the two types of datasets were put together to form whole stories of these participants. Analysis of these stories helped refine and summarise the main findings and themes. These case studies also helped me gain more coherent understandings of the mutual associations and interplay among these different datasets. These participants were selected because their comprehensive accounts provided particularly useful platforms for the exploration of these young people's college roommate relationship negotiations and the materiality of their living experiences. Anli's (female, graduate) account illustrates the dynamic and flexibility of friendships and a sense of togetherness built into university dormitories. Wei Song's (male, third-year) case study highlights the complexity of dorm relationships and how these social negotiations are shaped by the university's residential arrangements and rules. Mingyu's (male, second-year) story particularly demonstrates the roles played by the material space and objects in the relationship negotiations in his dorms.

Following this first step, the visual datasets were analysed. As highlighted before, the visual data are not just elicitation for interviews, but they also form independent datasets. In this sense, there was a relatively separate analysis of the visual datasets, rather than analysing them as part of textual data from the transcripts. Visual files are the ways through which participants more directly show their life and even social identity to the researcher (Rose, 2016). But these reflections in my research needed to be further probed qualitatively to compare the differences and similarities, find reasons for special situations and connect with other data to seek hidden information and develop the codes and themes.

In the analysis process of dorm photos, I made notes, focusing on the structure and curation of the spaces and the significant objects the participants highlighted. Some participants offered more than one photo taken at different times; the changes of these visual files were also analysed to explore the dynamics of everyday life in the dorm over time. In terms of the emotion maps, apart from analysis notes, I drew a mega map to visually summarise how the various emotions were distributed in different dorm spaces in general. The analyses of these two types of visual data were carried out at the same time to form a clearer, big picture of these visual datasets for further analysis. Some questions involving the sensory, social and emotional experiences in certain spaces or the significance of their ties with certain objects emerged in this process, which were followed up in the analysis of interview transcripts to be gradually extended to deep and relational interpretation and individual cases. In the interview analysis, the things taken into account were not just the texts of the transcripts, but also those raised in the visual datasets and the university documents I analysed initially. These formed a type of 'relational reading' (Keats, 2009), establishing conversations between all types of datasets. In this process, these datasets not only interpreted but also complemented each other, rather than being exclusive to each other.

Coding was the core work of this thematic analysis process, which was completed mainly through NVivo for the manageability and security of data analysis. Part of the analysis of visual datasets was also done through this software. There were various groups of codes focusing on different datasets in my research, but they were also linked to each other due to the bonds among these datasets. For example, I applied 'Problems of annoying roommates' and 'Building and development of intimacy' mainly in textual datasets from interview transcripts. For visual datasets, I used codes mainly based on different spaces or objects of the dorm, like 'Balcony', 'Personal loft-bed' and 'Special decoration', due to their close connections to the material environment of dormitories. However, codes like 'Special decorations' can be related to or overlap with codes like 'Building and development of intimacy' in certain personal experiences narrated by some participants.

As I mentioned in Chapter 3, this project is pre-framed by the concepts of relationality, shared living in higher education and materiality. This conceptual framework played a significant role throughout the research process ranging from research design to data analysis and discussion. As I displayed previously in this chapter, I selected the research methods based on this framework, focusing on college roommates' everyday relationship negotiations in shared living and their associations with the policy, sociocultural and material contexts in the Chinese HE system. These rationales then supported my data analysis and

discussion, including the coding process. Many codes and the main themes generated from the data focus on the relational, emotional and material aspects of shared college dorm living.

On the other hand, there were also some concepts emerging from the data I collected. For example, the roles played by the university-made accommodation rules in roommate relationships, the notion of 'being socially smart' in tension management, the importance of the materials like bed curtains to the public-private boundary shaping in the highly shared dorm living. Although these emerging concepts are underpinned by the conceptual framework set up in advance, they were inductively generated from the data rather than being originally derived from the existing ideas of relationality, shared living in HE or materiality. In this sense, coding and analysing this part of data updated the knowledge of the initial conceptual framework. Meanwhile, this conceptual framework was not just applied but also developed in my research process, through the combination of the deductive and inductive approach.

The codes of this research are all included in the codebook (see Appendix 8) which evolved throughout the data analysis process. Based on the research questions and thematic framework schedule for interviews and the conceptual development through coding process, the findings were finally generated and the detailed results are discussed in the following empirical chapters.

4.4 Ethics

Before the empirical work began, the project received ethical approval (see Appendix 4) from the University of Sheffield's ethical committee (application number: 035688). As noted in previous sections, the university documents I analysed were open to the public and the parts of the platforms I accessed are also publicly available. According to the *Ethics Guidelines and Collected Resources for Digital Research: Digital Research Ethics Annexe* of BSA (2017b), the informed consent for these documents can be exempted due to their public availability. How my fieldwork was planned and conducted also attached importance to the responsibilities for participants' well-being and protecting their rights, interests, sensitivities and privacy (British Sociological Association, 2017a).

Before participant recruitment, I translated the information sheet (see Appendix 2) and consent forms (see Appendix 3) for both the undergraduate and graduate participants from

English to Chinese and explained these two documents including their key contents to each participant in the informal contact before the interview. I gave participants time to ask questions about the project and what was involved. Moreover, I especially explained the significance of the research consent to them and confirmed the confidentiality of their personal information and their rights to decide whether to give consent and withdraw from the research. I also informed them of the recording of interviews and gained their agreement in advance. As I showed in previous sections, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, all the interviews were conducted online except for the pilot, which took place before the severer lockdown. In the pilot interview, the participant and I both took anti-epidemic measures like wearing face masks and sanitising our hands.

As I previously stated, my research focuses on personal life with its multifaceted emotional and relational experiences. Due to the involvement of emotions and interpersonal relationships including their negative sides, my research had the possibility of causing discomfort for participants. To reduce this potential risk, apart from guaranteeing their rights to remote and preparing to help, I also paid attention to my words and expressions in the fieldwork design and communications with every participant. I was careful to be sensitive and avoid probing topics that seemed difficult. Furthermore, optional timeout was offered in each interview. I suggested that undergraduate participants take part in the fieldwork away from their roommates or other relevant people to avoid potential misunderstandings, by which I tried to minimise any possible negative influence of my research on their roommate relationships.

Participants' personal information is protected in my research. The personal data collected for this research has all been managed in line with data protection principles and legislation. All the data generated have been completely anonymised, including participants' names, the names of their universities and people they mentioned in interviews. These names have all been changed to pseudonyms. Although I quoted some dorm photos in the thesis to help demonstrate certain findings with participants' permission, I tried to avoid showing pictures with a high possibility of identification. Moreover, as I mentioned before, no person is shown in any photo.

All the data files are only accessible by me and my supervisors. All the audio records were stored safely and deleted after the transcripts were made. Most of the research-related documents are digital, stored securely in passwords-protected electronic storage spaces and all are encrypted. Digital consent forms were stored separately. Some paper documents,

including an emotion map, some consent forms and demographic sheets and research notes were scanned and stored digitally, then the paper versions were securely stored in a locked space and all the consent forms were stored separately. These files will be destroyed following the required duration of the ethics committee.

4.5 Reflexivity and Positionality

Reflexivity

In addition to ethical issues, being reflexive is also an important point to consider in my empirical work. As noted by Mauthner and Doucet (2003), reflexivity is an essential approach that is widely used in qualitative social research to help reflect on the process of knowledge construction in data collection and analysis, it reveals how research results can be influenced by a range of issues like the researchers' social identities and biography, their emotional interactions with participants, their theoretical stances and even the circumstances of the research. Reflecting on fieldwork practices and outcomes can make the project more rigorous, particularly in qualitative research in which the interpretations of texts, communications and other personal actions play significant roles. Being reflexive can also help deepen the understanding of the research, including the positions of the researcher and respondents, the researched social phenomena and the relevant theoretical or practical environment, which can help update the ongoing research progress or the future development of such studies.

As a researcher focusing on intimate social relationships which can usually be sensitive, my research encountered challenges in communications with participants, particularly during the interviews. Some participants were not willing to say more about their relationships with roommates, especially negative experiences or feelings. Some even provided contradictory narratives to avoid or cover up the negative emotions or evaluations involving roommate relationships. These limited my explorations of their relationships and emotional negotiations in dorm living. A few mentioned their worry about being thought of as abnormal if they showed more negative emotions about roommate relationships. In such cases, I explained that there was no right or wrong evaluation of their feelings and referred to the confidentiality and help I could offer if they felt uncomfortable. I also changed some communication methods during the interviews to avoid directly talking about emotions. These strategies encouraged more narratives about relationships and emotional experiences in some interviews. However, they still failed in a few interviews and thus I could only interpret the

participants' relational and emotional negotiations with roommates based on their descriptions of daily interactions or events in dorm living.

Apart from the above challenges related to my research topic, my project was also impacted by the Covid-19. As I previously mentioned, my research experienced the early days of the pandemic, which made me move the empirical work online. In the original fieldwork plan, the in-person observations of students' dorm spaces and residential life were supposed to be applied to explore the associations between the relationship negotiations and material environments of student dorms in Chinese universities, due to address the third research question. Because of the Covid-19 lockdown, these observations were mainly replaced by the approach of photography to probe into the interplay between the social and material aspects of dorm living. I also collected the spatial structure and some scenes of shared living in participants' dorms from their emotion maps and interviews.

During the fieldwork process, remote interviews gave participants more freedom to decide whether to present with the camera on when talking about this sensitive topic, but the change in contact approach also challenged my communications with them. In the remote interviews, although I took every effort to ensure the strong Internet connections and avoided potential technical problems as much as possible, some issues still happened occasionally, such as the slightly delayed or fuzzy image transmission and the dim lighting on participants' sides. Due to these situations, sometimes I could not capture participants' emotional expressions as clearly as I could have done in person, nor could I ensure if participants' moods were impacted by our talk or my questions. This was particularly the case when the participants chose to take part in the interviews via audio calls and their faces are thus invisible at all. Meanwhile, completing the emotion map online was acceptable or even efficient for some participants, but it was also a little bit complicated for a few participants because of its requirements for the relevant technical tools and knowledge. Although I helped these participants finish the emotion maps via screen sharing and other technical support, sometimes it made the interviews longer than they were supposed to be.

In addition to the technical accessibility, the time difference between China and the UK also impacted the interviews with the participants in China. Because of the time difference, some interviews took place in the evening in China and a few interviewees felt tired before the interviews ended or had to stop in a short time due to the next day's schedule. Although I took some measures to cope with these issues, like controlling the time length of interviews or dividing them into two sessions, the difficulty of finding the best time and the challenges of

being flexible to the changing circumstances still somewhat restricted the quality of our communications and the interview progress. Meanwhile, it was harder to build rapport with some participants in remote connections than face-to-face communications, due to a sense of distance caused by the spatial and temporal differences, especially in some cases in which we talked without seeing each other's face. Like other issues caused by the remote fieldwork in my research, the difficulty in rapport establishment also made it challenging for me to keep the conversations flowing in the empirical process.

Positionality

As a Chinese student who used to study in a Chinese university for undergraduate study, I also had four years of dorm living experience. I was assigned to a six-person dormitory and lived together with five other female students. We were all from the same department and three were my classmates. There were three bunk beds for us to sleep on and desks and shelves were shared. I experienced happiness, annoyance, a sense of distance but sometimes also cohesion in my shared dorm living and my feelings about my roommates were fluctuating and ambivalent in general. My own experiences in a Chinese university dormitory formed a part of the reason why I was interested in this topic and decided to develop this research. From these past experiences, I gained a range of knowledge and a sense of familiarity to the shared dorm living of the undergraduates in Chinese universities and thus had the position of an insider in the fieldwork. However, I was not a complete insider, because I graduated more than six years earlier - and I was different from the graduate participants who are in professional fields, which made me an outsider.

As emphasised by Mesman (2007, p. 290), the positions of "*insider*" and "*outsider*" can co-exist and shift in the research and it is important for the researcher to recognize different situations and find a balance between them. The similar intertwining and its pros and cons were also presented in my fieldwork. On one hand, being an 'insider' helped me build rapport with participants due to similar higher educational and dorm living experiences. It also facilitated our mutual understanding and communications before or during the interviews. Moreover, it also helped me analyse universities' documents on their virtual platforms. These promoted the progress of my empirical work, particularly data generation.

On the other hand, I also experienced the risk of taking some information for granted due to my own experiences. Furthermore, although the similarity of experiences and the related rapport helped prompt conversations and some participants especially wanted to talk much more in the interviews, sometimes a few of them talked too much and digressed from the

research topic. Sometimes participants were curious about my past experiences and asked me relevant questions in turn. To deal with these issues, I tried to remind myself of another position as the 'outsider': when I designed the fieldwork and organised the interviews, I tried to make my words and expressions as neutral and objective as possible.

I also made memos and notes alongside every transcript, based on my research questions and the framework concepts supporting my research. In this way, I tried to ensure the quality of my data and reduce the potential ignorance or assumptions I might have made but might not easily recognize. For those who seemed to be off-track in interviews, I drew them back by changing the subjects. As I just mentioned, being an 'outsider' helped reduce the biased or off-track factors which might have disrupted my data generation. Nevertheless, my overseas study and life also intrigued some participants and caused another type of off-track tendency during interviews. I used similar strategies to keep interviews on track and spared time for these chats. In addition, although I introduced the basic information of my project and myself in the recruitment post and information sheet, some participants were still not familiar with PhDs and research, they were thus a bit nervous at the beginning of the recruitment and some even asked if the investigation would be as difficult as an exam. To help them relax, I revealed my identity as an insider, telling them that I had also experienced shared dorm living and that I just wanted to chat with them about this kind of experience rather than trying to test them.

My positionality also involved the translation work in my research. Throughout the fieldwork, the communication between participants and me were almost all in Chinese, our shared first language. However, most of my research plans, many framework notions and my whole PhD thesis are all in English. Translations between these two languages were thus important throughout my research. In this way, apart from the translations in data analysis discussed in the previous section, I also performed translations, including dealing with relevant cultural and communication-related issues, in other stages of my empirical work, which also formed part of the challenges of conducting my research.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined why and how I planned and conducted the empirical work, mixing qualitative methods and focusing on the experiences of both undergraduate and graduate participants. Through purposive sampling and with the assistance of snowball and convenience strategies, my research recruited both current undergraduates and graduate

participants, to consolidate the coherence and richness of the data. By building dialogues among document analysis, photography, emotion maps and semi-structured interviews, including different datasets generated from these methods, I explored and presented a multifaceted, fluid and context-embedded shared living of students in Chinese university dormitories. In this sense, the mix of these qualitative methods helped me get more coherent answers to my research questions and effectively meet the research purpose.

I paid constant attention to ensure my research met the ethical requirements of sociological research. My identity as both insider and the outsider and my personal biography brought both benefits and challenges to my fieldwork; balancing the two points was thus also a focus throughout my empirical analysis. In addition, there were also challenges related to managing and analysing a range of datasets with different types, translations between English and Chinese and working during the Covid-19 pandemic, which impacted my empirical work and results to some extent. In the following chapter, I explicitly discuss what I found through this fieldwork, focusing on relationship negotiations of young people in their shared dorm living.

Chapter 5 Negotiating Social Relationships in the Dormitory

Introduction

Negotiating relationships with roommates is central to dorm living and thus forms the main part of every participant's account. This chapter examines the variety of ways in which these negotiation processes worked. From the participants' narratives, three key findings emerged. Firstly, these young people create closeness through various shared experiences in their dorm living, but dorm living can also become an ambivalent process where tension and intimacy are intertwined. Secondly, these young roommates' relational and emotional negotiations can also be shaped by their practices involving the wider institutional environment, including being together in study, and following and breaking the university's accommodation rules. Thirdly, these young people demonstrate various ways of managing the tensions in dorm living, displaying a range of social skills and strategies that were learnt and deployed during the course of their university life, which further reflected their perceptions on shared dorm living in practical social circumstances under the wider institutional and sociocultural contexts. By discussing these three findings in this chapter, I demonstrate that it is not possible to conceptualise these young people's dorm living and their roommate relationships as merely good or bad, friendly or unfriendly; furthermore, how tensions can be raised and managed involves not just students' solidarity but more complex situations.

The three key areas of findings are discussed in detail in three sections, mainly within the sociological framework of relationality and shared living. Drawing on the concepts of relationship negotiations in non-kin shared living and critical friendships, the first section reflects on how a sense of 'homely' dorm living is created through growing interpersonal closeness (Kenyon, 1999), is formed through the shared regular and exceptional experiences and how it can also be difficult and non-static (Smart *et al.*, 2012). Apart from revisiting studies involving the above notions discussed in Chapter 2, I also engage with the wider literature on the specific practices and disputes presented in my data, like leisure, food, gifts and birthday celebrations, and social care. The second section of the chapter focuses on the special institutional context in Chinese higher education (HE), discussing how roommate relationships can be shaped over various settings with an overlap of different identities and the roles played by university accommodation rules. The final section of the chapter discusses how these participants manage the tensions in their dorm living, drawing on notions of difficulty in friendships (see for example Davies and Heaphy, 2011) and

multifaceted pathways of shared living (Heath *et al.*, 2017), through an engagement of arguments about humour and the collectivistic culture in China.

5.1 Forming and developing relationships through shared experiences

In the narratives of relationship negotiations in dorm living, a majority of participants mentioned the practices they shared with roommates. These shared experiences helped create and improve a close relationship and a friendly or even intimate dormitory atmosphere. But being together does not necessarily bring happiness – conflicts and tensions also occur as people get more intimate and sometimes they emerge as a direct result of spending time together, which can cause tensions. According to participants' narratives, the sources of shared practices associated with roommate relationship negotiations can be divided into two types. One is daily routines and rituals in dorm living, including shared leisure time, food sharing and gift giving and birthday celebration. Another type is roommates' caring, especially that generated in exceptional moments. By analysing the relational and emotional negotiations in these experiences, this section discusses how these young people interact and build relationships through dorm living.

5.1.1 Sharing routines and rituals

Conversations and having fun

As mentioned by Heath and colleagues (Heath *et al.*, 2017, pp. 106 & 113), some people in shared households tend to create “family-like” and “friendship-like” relationships with their housemates by sharing everyday and ritual time to cultivate a sense of stability, security and belonging. This relationship negotiation approach and how it helps create a warm or even home-like environment are presented variously in the stories of participants of this research. In terms of shared routines, daily conversation was referred to by almost all participants. To these young people, this is a simple and free approach to emotional and knowledge exchange, which can take place with an unfixed topic and time. Compared with shared households in research by Heath and colleagues (Heath *et al.*, 2017), the more open and smaller inner space of these university dormitories seems to give these young people more chances for daily conversation. They can start chatting in the dorm whenever they want and everyone in the dorm at that moment can directly hear and join in. Thus, it is unsurprising that even collective chat can be a routine of numerous dormitories in this research.

However, the significance of interacting in shared time highlighted by Heath and colleagues (Heath *et al.*, 2017) focuses not just on the time spent together but more importantly its quality from which people could form a sense of cohesion, because sometimes interacting with housemates can just be “*necessary or ‘polite’*” (Heath *et al.*, 2017, p. 113). Similarly, although many frequent or long-lasting daily chats were found in my research, not all of them can reflect or help shape intimacy. According to participants, the routine conversations which help them – men as well as women – to get closer to their roommates usually involve details of their personal experiences or relationships, for example, “*we talk more about love, girls, exes...also talked about previous life experiences in primary school and high school*” (Yongming Liu, male, third-year), “*we talked much about future plans after graduation, like which university to go to for further study*” (Feng Wu, male, graduate), “*we chatted about the guys some of us had a crush on*” (Jianning Zhu, female, graduate), and “*we all know who of us is in love with which girl and who is dumped*” (Huan Lan, male, third-year). By exchanging more personal information, these college roommates get to know each other better, including through affection and commonality, both of which are the basis of closeness (Spencer and Pahl, 2006). Meanwhile, the knowledge shared in these conversations is deeper and more personal than that usually shared with strangers or acquaintances, indicating more intimate relationships (Morgan, 2009). Sometimes chats without deep or personal information can also contribute to the closeness in the dorms, but they are usually attached to other shared quality activities in routine time.

According to participants' accounts, having fun together can also play a role in the development of dormitory intimacy. For instance, Wei Song, a third-year male undergraduate, narrated the moment when he plays poker and Monopoly together with his roommates:

I think that should be the most relaxing time for every one of us four. We were all very happy, we were free to play jokes on each other and showed our most unbridled side, the whole process was very cheerful and light-hearted. (Wei, 14/04/2021)

According to Wei's account, the interactions in his dorm at this moment were more casual and intimate than usual: no one was angry, no matter what tensions there were at other times. Similar to the game time in Wei's dorm, other shared leisure time in dormitories were discussed by other participants, like the shared aerobics mentioned by Yoyo Deng (female, first-year) and playing the guitar together mentioned by Bing Gu (female, first-year), which are often attached to the comments like “*the moment brings me closer to them*” (Bing).

As Hutchinson and colleagues (Hutchinson, Afifi and Krause, 2007) note, shared family time which brings relational and emotional comfort to a family following divorce can be helpful to the maintenance or resilience of family relationships among the members of this family. Based on the positive and cheerful emotional bonds built through these shared family activities, people and their families can reduce the anxiety surrounding their relationships and become motivated to build or feel a sense of family (Hutchinson, Afifi and Krause, 2007). Aligning with Hutchinson and colleagues (Hutchinson, Afifi and Krause, 2007), Wei's experience of fun time sharing and similar collective fun time mentioned by other participants reflect the significance of collective leisure time to forming or strengthening a sense of cohesion in university dormitories. They remind these young people that their proximity can promote fun and enjoyment as well as problems. On this basis, these young people can build confidence in their roommate relationships and promote closeness in general. Meanwhile, the shared positive feelings from these free and harmonious moments can form positive emotional ties between the college roommates and help them develop a sense of belonging and security in their dorm living and relationships, which can be reflected in their more casual behaviours during this time - joking with each other and being uninhibited together without worry, as Wei observed. In Yoyo's account, she described these behaviours as *"we live it up together"*.

In some cases, leisure time can also be shared outside the dorm and sometimes it can even take place in the virtual world. Playing video games is a leisure time activity which *"bridges the digital and 'physical'"* (Eklund and Roman, 2019, p. 33), through which people in the real world can be influenced by their experiences in the virtual world. In some participants' accounts, the virtual experiences shared with roommates can not only generate fun but also bring them closer, particularly at the beginning of dorm living. *"We were like strangers at the very beginning, but then we got to know each other soon and became closer after playing video games together"* said Jun Tian, a first-year male undergraduate. His narrative reflects the effect of sharing fun time in a virtual world on the creation of dormitory closeness in the real world. This may be related to the function of shared video games. Completing tasks together in a familiar virtual environment can help new college roommates reduce the sense of strangeness and build mutual trust (Waddel and Peng, 2014). In this way, this shared virtual activity works as a strategy to help these young people accept their new identity as part of the roommate group and integrate into real-life dorm living.

Food practices

Food practices are also frequently presented in participants' accounts of the closeness they share with roommates. Practices about food and eating together are highlighted as an important part of family or household living in other studies. For example, Hutchinson and colleagues (Hutchinson, Afifi and Krause, 2007, p. 32) highlight the symbolic meaning of meal sharing as "*being a family*". Heath and colleagues (Heath *et al.*, 2017) also found that shared mealtime is a quality routine which can help create and maintain closeness among sharers. Food sharing as the source of family-like feelings in these studies includes cooking and sharing the same meals as people usually do in their family home. In most Chinese universities, students are usually not allowed to cook in the dormitory - they have to eat meals in the university dining hall. However, quite a few participants mentioned the routine of sharing snacks or fruit in their dorms; some also mentioned the experience of having meals together in the dining hall. Meanwhile, in most participants' accounts, foods are the most frequently and actively shared items in the dorm.

From these food practices, these young people can form a sense of belonging and embeddedness to their roommate groups. For example, Wei referred to the practice of food sharing in the dorm in his account. "*We would buy many foods like fruits and have them together, we share food very often*". He described this practice as "*a bond in roommate relationships*". Similarly, Wanyin Cao, a third-year female undergraduate, regarded this routine as "*a necessary strategy to build proximity among roommates*". These two accounts reflect the quality of this food sharing time which not only gives the college roommates a chance to enjoy the same food together but more importantly helps them form emotional connections with each other. Jianning also talked about the snack/fruit time in her college dorm, explaining they had a routine because of their common interest in food: "*We all liked tasting foods, so we often bought and then ate some snacks or fruits together*". Common interest made their collective snack/fruit time and the construction of closeness begin early in collective shopping for these snacks, and this shared routine also maintained this commonality and thus their closeness.

In addition to the quality shared routines, some participants also mentioned how the rituals in their dorms, usually related to more special occasions, are associated with their roommate relationships. In Wei's story, he referred to an annual New Year's Eve dinner in his dorm and discussed its significance to their intimacy in his account:

My roommates and I work together for the whole cooking process ... we make a very simple dinner, so we won't break the restriction ... New Year's Eve became significant to us and we also became closer through cooking and having dinner together. We have been doing it for three years and will continue next year, it's a special get-together. (Wei, 14/04/2021)

Wei's narrative about this ritual supports an argument in the research by Heath and colleagues (Heath *et al.*, 2017, p.114), which highlights the importance of food rituals to the formation of "a sense of 'we' as a household". By working and reworking the collective memories about this "house activity" (Morgan, 2011; Heath *et al.*, 2017, p. 114), Wei and his roommates built a sense of group belonging and shared value. In this sense, New Year's Eve means not just a festival but more importantly a get-together dinner time for them. Meanwhile, insisting on this ritual despite the limits of the environment also reflects their expectations and commitment to the stability of their closeness and unit identity (Howe, 2002).

Food rituals are presented differently in different participants' accounts, but the importance of food in bonding people is clear. For example, Anli Li, a female graduate participant, discussed how she and her roommates organised hot-pot parties in their dorm in the final year of college, which formed a key aspect of her fond memories of her time at university:

We brought a table to the dormitory ... I was quite impressed with this. Then we got a rice cooker to make hot pot and played cards ... This really occupied a lot of my memories of the final year, eating hot pot, playing poker, hahaha ... If this activity took place in the first year, I think it would promote our relationships. Unfortunately, it was in the final year. Our relationships had been almost stable, so I think we would still get along very well without these. (Anli, 03/02/2021)

Although Anli did not attribute her positive roommate relationships to the hot-pot parties – as she felt the close bond between herself and her roommates had already been established when they started these rituals - she emphasised how these parties were unforgettable to her. Meanwhile, her narrative reflects the associations between this ritual and the closeness in her dorm, demonstrating how social relationships and moments of being together shape the meaning of each other in shared living (Heath *et al.*, 2017). It is because of the

developed sense of stability and intimacy that they could still construct a food ritual on lively occasions to end their college time and shared living. In this sense, the hot-pot parties symbolise their closeness. On the other hand, memories are closely connected to emotions and collective memories can particularly help build strong emotional ties (Smart, 2007). Anli keeps a detailed memory of this ritual and, according to her interview, she maintained intimate relationships with most of her roommates after leaving university. This reflects a bond among these people and thus illustrates that the hot-pot parties helped maintain and even extend their closeness.

Birthday celebrations and gift giving

In addition to food rituals, celebrating a roommate's birthday, particularly giving birthday gifts, was also discussed by many participants. As suggested by Mauss (1990), gift giving is a social exchange practice with the meanings of both generous giving and expedience; it is reciprocal and obligatory and thus links people in society and forms a tie of solidarity. Building on Mauss' (1990) arguments, Komter (2001, p. 389) noted that social bonds are "created, sustained and strengthened by means of gifts". Similarly, Hurdley (2007) suggested that gifts can be of importance for people to construct and maintain social relations. Smart (2007) mentioned gifts' symbolic significance to personal relationships and highlighted these effects on people's emotional ties. The important roles played by gifts and gift giving in promoting intimacy and cohesion are echoed by Yoyo's account, which shows how birthday celebrations and gift giving take place in her dorm:

People except the birthday girl will set up a WeChat group to secretly discuss the gift. It's often the clothes in the style which you usually wouldn't try, but they will make you challenge it ... I have received this gift once...oh my God, hahaha ... (Yoyo, 22/04/2021)

These birthday celebrations and special gifts reflect the high level of intimacy that can happen in dorm living situations. Birthday celebrations often involve family (Morgan, 2011), but in the absence of family, celebrating with roommates can help form a sense of home in the dorm and make people feel like family to their roommates. Such birthday rituals, including gifts, can reinforce the relationship between Yoyo and her roommates, which is not only fun, but also family-like. As Yoyo described it, this ritual and the gifts promote their relationship 'almost to the top'. In Jun's account, birthday celebration and gift giving are more directly manifested as a kind of surrogate family practices:

They are traditions in our dorm ... most of our birthdays are during the term-time and thus we cannot celebrate at home. So, you cannot go home for it, we will do it for you. The birthday person will receive gifts from others [roommates]; other guys will also buy him a cake together ... the presents do not have to be expensive, just show the blessing would be great ... I think they are good traditions, they would make us closer and more intimate. (Jun, 17/04/2021)

According to Jun's narrative, the birthday traditions, including gift giving, are thought to be family rituals moved to the dorm. This is related to the mandatory dorm living policy mentioned in Chapter 2, in which college students without special exceptions must live in university dormitories during term-time. In this context, as Jun reflected, most members of his dorm cannot return to their family home or be with their families for a birthday celebration, because it is still in term-time. By substituting for families to keep these family rituals, a sense of togetherness can be built and developed among these young people, as Jun said. His narratives of what they should do for these traditions also reveals a sense of obligation, demonstrating the mutually rewarding and responsibility-related characteristics of gift giving and their effects on solidarity, as per Mauss's (1990) observations. Meanwhile, the benefits or rewards these young people get from birthday gifts are based more on emotional and relational than economic values. The expectations of such emotional and relational interests is also illustrated by Yingying Tang, who mentioned a birthday gift she received from a roommate and said how she was very moved by it:

She gave me a cake for my birthday this year. The words on the cake really brought tears to my eyes. They were just simple words, but she put my nickname on it, that nickname ... It's really touching! ... It's the best birthday gift I received this year!
(Yingying Tang, female, third year, 03/05/2021)

According to her narrative, the nickname on the cake reflected a highlighting of their intimacy. Yingying's reaction also reveals the emotional significance of the gift: *"for me, the sincere blessing is much more important than the price."*

To sum up, sharing quality routines and rituals can play an important role in creating and consolidating cohesive and intimate ties among college roommates. However, according to participants' narratives, dormitory closeness can be formed not only through these every day

or regular occasions but also through exceptional moments these college roommates encounter together. This will be the focus of the next subsection.

5.1.2 Care in mundane interactions

According to the data, exceptional health issues of roommates often generate caring practices in the dorm, which can contribute to dormitory closeness. For example, Huan discussed in his account how he and two other roommates rushed another roommate to the hospital and cared for him when he suddenly fainted. They experienced this twice and Huan spoke in his interview about how this experience created a heightened sense of intimacy and trust in his dorm:

In the first year, one of my roommates fainted. The other three of us rushed him to the hospital together and stayed there with him until his parents arrived. We started to build a mutual trust from then on ... He fainted again last October and we heaved him onto the stretcher and then rushed him to the hospital again ... I think it promoted our intimacy; we always have a mutual trust. (Huan, 16/04/2021)

Caring is often linked to family practices; it is associated with morality and emotions and can support the construction of family bonds (Morgan, 2011). Huan's experiences demonstrate that caring practices can also play the same role in the context of the dormitory, as its physical, moral and emotional values still work in roommate relationships. Through this caring practice, the carers formed and strengthened a sense of responsibility to that roommate, which can further develop into a sense of group belonging. Meanwhile, Huan said that they all stayed with the ill roommate in the hospital until his parents arrived. Their caring and company at this crisis moment not only had physical significance, but also showed the cared-for that they would be there for him and gave him emotional support, even without verbal communication (Brownlie, 2011). Moreover, the unexpected nature of the moment of sudden crisis created what Spencer and Pahl (2006, p. 73) in their analysis of friendships term a "*trigger situation or crisis where one person needs help or support and the other rises to the occasion*", which accelerated the progress of their closeness. Similarly, consolidating the same sense of commitment and addressing the risk together also created a 'shared history' among the carers and thus promoted their friendships (Spencer and Pahl, 2006). This caring practice in Huan's dorm helped to build a bond characterised by heightened trust not just between the carers and cared-for but also among Huan and other carers, in Huan's words, the result was that "*we all trust each other more*".

The data also contain examples of how care for one another's safety in the dorm was generated from mundane dorm living. Sheng Luo, a male graduate participant, told how he and other roommates protected one roommate and helped him apply for compensation when this boy encountered bullying on campus. Like the healthcare in Huan's narrative, the caring experience in Sheng's account also seems to be a reflection of family practice in the university dormitory. It is particularly like the protective care between siblings in school (Hadfield, Edwards and Mauthner, 2006; Edwards *et al.*, 2006). As suggested by Hadfield, Edwards and Mauthner (2006), many children can protect or be protected by their siblings when facing violent issues in school, which forms a support and activates a tie between siblings outside the family home. Although coming from different families, Sheng and other roommates also offered support to their roommate to cope with bullying in an environment with no access to family support. This surrogate sibling support also stimulated a bond among these college roommates. According to Sheng's account, this event occurred at the beginning of their college years and he described this as "*a good start for us*", because the sense of togetherness and group belonging they gained from this moment formed a positive beginning and a strong emotional basis of their closeness development. Even after years of graduation, Sheng still clearly remembered this experience, particularly his feeling of "*we could be so solid*" at that moment, which demonstrates the importance of this memory, especially the relational and emotional ties associated with it (Smart, 2007). This also illustrates the importance of this protection experience to Sheng's college roommate practice in forging a solid emotional bond and cohesive relationships.

Caring experience is also presented in Anli's account. However, rather than caring for a sick roommate or protecting a roommate from bullying, she talked about how one of her roommates helped the rest of the dorm ease fears after they watched a thriller together on a whim and her feeling on this:

Anli: We were all terrified by the movie except for one girl ... but she didn't sleep well that night after watching, because everyone who wanted to go to the toilet badly needed her company and she was thus woken up several times.

Interviewer: How do you feel about that experience?

Anli: In fact, I was not that intimate with her before that. She was always busy and her personality was too strong. But I found her caring and gentle side through this experience, and we became closer and closer since then. (03/02/2021)

It seems that the occasion in Anli's account was more routine and less urgent or risk-centred than those narrated by Huan and Sheng. However, Anli's experience still played a role as a "trigger situation" to the friendship between Anli and her roommate (Spencer and Pahl, 2006, p. 73), mainly due to the unexpected emergence of her roommate's care. According to Anli's narrative, she did not anticipate that her roommate would repeatedly agree to accompany them to the bathroom again and again when they were scared, because she did not think the girl was warm and easy-going. In this sense, her roommate's help was a surprise which was able to quickly build a tie between them (Spencer and Pahl, 2006). Based on Anli's interview, it might have been difficult for her and her roommate to even be friends, but Anli changed her mind about that girl after this event and their relationship transformed into friendship and finally they became best friends. Thus, the surprise and changed feelings about that roommate both illustrate Anli's emotional process which underpinned the relational transformation between her and her roommate. This sheds light on the emotionality and fluidity of relational transactions, including in friendships (Finn, 2015). The exceptional transformation in this non-static process can further reflect the unpredictability and nonlinearity of friendship (Spencer and Pahl, 2006). Because of these traits, these caring moments in Anli's experience can contribute to dormitory closeness not only by tightening and forming the foundation for the intimacy, but also by redirecting the emotional and relational negotiation from slight alienation to building close friendship.

Thus, the shared experiences which generate care, including both support in health or safety crises and help in episodes in dorm living, can offer various opportunities for these young people to build and develop bonds in their dorms. This type of shared experience and the routine and ritual practices noted above in the last subsection demonstrate the creation and development of dormitory closeness. As revealed by participants' accounts, establishing and developing intimacy and a sense of togetherness form an important part of shared college dorm living. However, many accounts also show that relationships and emotional experiences that emerge from college roommates' interactions and friendship negotiations are not always positive – they can also be challenging, as discussed in the next subsection.

5.1.3 The manifestation of irritations in shared living

Annoyances gradually emerging as relationships develop

The previous discussions of the development of intimacy in dormitories reflect that college roommate relationships are non-static and can be negotiated in multifaceted ways. As discussed in Chapter 3, researchers like Smart and colleagues (Smart *et al.*, 2012) and Heaphy and Davies (2012) observe that friendships are always assumed to be positive, but they can also be critical associations including both positive and negative dimensions. Drawing on the concept of critical associations, this subsection explores the negative emotional and relational experiences that can exist alongside or even in opposition to the experiences of solidarity, togetherness or caring in dorm living. In their study of adult friendship, Blieszner and Adams (1992, p. 13) enumerate several “*negative or unpleasant emotions that friends may experience*” in their discussions of friendship process, listing actions like “*betrayal, manipulation, conflicts and competition*” as part of the elements of friendship. Similarly, Luzia (2011) describes both intimate interactions and potential conflicts as inescapable within the home in her research of growing family and home. Jianning’s account sheds light on both these two arguments, demonstrating how she gradually found her roommates annoying as she became more familiar with them:

We connected with and also understood each other more. I could feel that we were closer. But sometimes some problems also appeared when we knew more about each other ... I found that someone never cleaned the communal space and someone only cared about herself rather than anyone else. (Jianning, 04/06/2021)

Roommates’ selfishness and laziness and the specific irritation of cleaning generated a negative dorm living experience, but these issues were gradually acquired in the process of relational and emotional transactions between Jianning and her roommates. More importantly, the intimate and unpleasant feelings developed alongside a more positive intimacy during their time in the dorm and these feelings co-existed. A similar experience was also presented in Wei’s negotiation process of dormitory closeness:

When I first met Bo [Wei’s roommate], he looked very reticent, and I thought it would be hard to get along with him. But I knew him less at that time and didn’t know he was actually very nice. I felt good with Sang [Wei’s roommate] because he is talkative and humorous, but I didn’t expect to be annoyed by his carelessness and noise. I felt Simao [Wei’s roommate] is a like-minded person to me. But when we are

closer, I also began to find something about him, which was not that comfortable to me. (Wei, 14/04/2021)

As noted by Morgan (2009), the high levels of knowledge about and contact with roommates are important for the development of a relationship. The growth of dormitory closeness narrated by Jianning and Wei, particularly Wei's increasing affinity with Bo, both echo this argument. But according to the latter part of their narratives, greater familiarity and more interactions can also make it more likely for them to encounter the relationship experiences that could be "difficult, draining, cloying or even 'toxic'" (Davies and Heaphy, 2011, p. 6) and form ambivalences in their roommate relationships, but these did not stop their bonding with roommates. This type of relationship negotiation, with both positive and negative aspects, also reflects the concept of critical associations (Davies, 2019a) mentioned in Chapter 3 as part of the theoretical basis of my exploration.

Divergence on cleanliness

Many participants discussed difficulties in their relationships with roommates. Cleanliness of communal space, as raised by Jianning, was a common complaint. Similar narratives include "it was me who did the cleaning almost every time in the last semester." (Wanyin) and "my dorm is cleaned just by me and other two roommates in most cases, the rest seldom take part in." (Yi Su, a first-year male undergraduate). Lin Jin, a male graduate participant, also mentioned the cleaning issue in his dorm and linked it to the difference between his and his roommates in personal habits:

My roommates never cleaned up the water around the sink after using it, which made our bathroom dirty. Maybe it's because we have different habits, I felt uncomfortable when I saw a bathroom like that, but they felt okay. (Lin, 06/02/2021)

Similar to 'uncomfortable', the feelings like 'helpless' (Yi) and 'unsatisfied' (Wanyin) were also mentioned in participants' discussions of cleanliness. These comments reflect a kind of disappointment in their roommates due to this tricky issue (Keup, 2007) and the unfair sharing of this household task (Foulkes *et al.*, 2021). Based on participants' narratives, this is an issue which affects both men and women. Lin's comment also aligns with the argument highlighted in many Chinese studies of college roommate relationships, mentioned in Chapter 3, emphasising the connection between students' difference in lifestyles and

tensions in their relationships (see for example Liang, 2008). Nevertheless, disagreements about cleaning chores and personal differences in cleaning habits did not cause intense emotional impacts on participants. Although these disagreements made them feel unhappy, all participants thought it unnecessary to argue with their roommates or keep bad feelings about issues of cleanliness. As Yi stated: *“this kind of thing is not that serious to cause a dispute or rift among us”*. These young people's abilities to manage tensions and maintain relationships will be discussed in the next section. However, some participants discussed feeling angry about cleanliness. In these cases, it was not just the division of labour that upset them: there was an added element of disrespect with regards to shared cleaning:

It was in 2008. During a collective cleaning in my dorm, a guy did not do any work, but just ordered us to do this and that. His behaviour was so mean! (Feng, 30/01/2021)

The experience narrated by Feng happened 13 years ago, but he still clearly remembers it, particularly his feelings about his roommate's behaviour. As noted by Misztal (2003), people are more likely to keep distinct and long-standing memories of an event which caused intense emotional impact on them. Shedding light on this argument and based on Feng's expression, his memory of this cleaning issue reflects a strong dislike of his roommate's behaviour rather than just showing dissatisfaction. Moreover, what Feng's roommate did was not just considered impolite behaviour, but further revealed an inequality of position among college roommates in dorm living. This phenomenon and its emotional influence are more evidently presented in the account of Yingying:

One day we were supposed to clean the dorm together, but a roommate didn't clean with us. Instead, she just stood there with her arms around her chest, directing the rest of us in a very arrogant manner. The rest of us were very embarrassed ... I was just unhappy at that moment; I don't know if it is the power of the dormitory leader ... Sometimes she likes acting like a boss ... (Yingying, 03/05/2021)

As mentioned by Clark and colleagues (Clark *et al.*, 2018), unequal collaboration in domestic chores can be a source of tension in a shared household. Both Feng's and Yingying's accounts echo this argument. But Yingying's roommate was the leader of their dorm. According to most participants, there is a leader in every roommate group, based on the university's requirement. The dorm leader plays a role as the organiser or the person in charge of some dormitory affairs, although this role just works at certain times and the

relevant power is usually minor and unstable. Yingying's speculation about the connection between her roommate's behaviour and her identity as the dorm leader demonstrates the concept of "*pseudo-parent/child roles*" in college student households identified by Holton's (2016, p. 60) research. According to Holton, students can take various but uneven roles or positions in their shared living and form "*asymmetrical power balances*" (2016, p. 60), just like those in a family. But he also argues that this hierarchy can crumble if people cannot get the benefit they want, and it thus always requires negotiation. Aligning with this argument, Yingying's feeling of a sense of condescension from her roommate's behaviour and her aversion to it reflect her desire for everyone's participation in the cleaning task based on fair labour division and mutual respect, rather than an abuse of power and control of the task.

Disturbance of chaotic environment and difficulty in communication

Noise is another main source of irritation in dorm living. According to the data, this issue usually happens at night and often negatively affects participants' sleep. As noted above, Wei raised the noise issue caused by his roommate, saying "*he didn't consider our feelings*". Similar evaluations are also found in other comments, such as "*someone had bad habits like staying up late watching series on their computer without headphones. He wouldn't think about others.*" (Chen Jiang, male, graduate). These words echo the argument of Foulke and colleagues (Foulke, et al., 2021), that the core of noise problems in shared student accommodation is the maker's lack of consideration of the possible impact on other sharers. Based on the data, the clearest effect of these noise issues is bringing bodily discomfort to people: "*when I lay on the bed, I can hear them tapping and clicking, which I think is a kind of distraction to me. I cannot sleep well*" (Huan). As illustrated by Foulkes and colleagues (Foulkes, McMillan, and Gregory, 2019), the noise caused by flatmates can lead to bad sleep quality and then result in health problems. This is also reflected in Jianning's account, but because of the open structure of Chinese university dormitories, the noise that troubled her was accompanied by a light problem, forming a more intense impact: "*she always stayed up late with her desk lamp on, but her lamp was too bright. The light and the sounds of, like turning over the book, really affected my sleep and got on my nerves a little*" (Jianning).

Due to the evident bodily impact, participants try harder to address the noise problem, compared with their reactions to cleanliness issues. But many of them tended to change their own practices rather than confronting their roommates. For example, many participants used certain objects like bed curtains, earplugs or eye masks to reduce the impact, which formed part of the material culture in the university dormitory and is discussed in the next

chapter. Some participants tried to communicate with the roommates who made the noise (and/or) light disturbance to address these issues. However, not all these communications succeeded, some participants just got the reply like *"he doesn't say anything, but doesn't change anything either"* (Mingyu, male, second year). The uncompromising attitudes of roommates added challenges to addressing the issues and caused tension between participants and certain roommates, for example: *"We had tension due to his habit [that the roommate always made noise at night without considering others' feelings], which pulled me away from him"* (Chen).

According to research by Dusselier and colleagues (Dusselier *et al.*, 2005), both the tensions between roommates and poor sleep can cause stress for college students. Foulkes and colleagues (Foulkes *et al.*, 2019) also argued that the bad sleep caused by noise can trigger anger. Similarly, many participants revealed feelings of intensified anxiety and anger resulting from roommates' noise. In Huan's experience, noise problems did not just influence his sleep, but also impacted the whole environment of the dorm:

They start in the evening and last till midnight...much noise of video games and keyboard pounding ... I cannot do anything in that chaotic environment ... Every time when I come back, I can imagine the chaos inside even before walking through the door. (Huan, 16/04/2021)

A similar situation was also encountered by Mingyu who dislikes the environment of his dorm: *"it's too noisy, too chaotic! I'm different from them, they always play video games there for a whole day, but I like a quiet environment to study"*. Ding Ma, a male graduate participant, also described suffering in the dorm environment where there were noise, bad air and people from other dorms:

They invited those from the opposite dorm and made here [Ding's dorm] quite like a game hall, full of typing, shouting and smoke, which drove me crazy. But I couldn't contend with them, because I was the only one who wanted to study in the dorm. (Ding, 01/06/2021)

Another participant, Minglian Nie (male, graduate), also raised the chaotic and smoky environment of his dorm and described how it *"almost made me pass out"*. As reflected in the comments above, part of the problem from these participants is that they were the only ones troubled by the noise in their dorms, which created a sense of loneliness in these

participants when they faced noise or other complicated distractions. As mentioned by Mackei (2001), student accommodation is an important basis for college students to gain social support and integrate into the social life of a university. Wilcox and colleagues (Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld, 2005) further suggest that students living with incompatible others, including those with different styles of socialising and using the residential environment, can feel a lack of emotional support and difficult relational integration and thus have an uncomfortable university experience. Echoing these arguments, these participants' accounts reveal not just their physical discomfort but also a feeling of helplessness due to not being supported by their roommates or being able to fit in with them. According to the data, this negative emotional impact is stronger on Mingyu and Ding, because they found that they were not just incompatible with their roommates on certain issues but were not able to integrate into the wider atmosphere of their dorms. When noting this irritation, both frequently said "*we [they and their roommates] are different kinds of people, I want to study but they just want to play*", emphasising a kind of exclusion and isolation between them and their roommates.

Negative emotions arising from bonding practices

According to some participants, even those practices that could promote intimacy between roommates, such as providing care, could result in negative emotions. For instance, in Minglian's account of a caring practice in which he looked after a drunken roommate, he described his feelings as "*dislike and awkward, it caused me trouble ... but I had to, it's like a kind of obligation*". As defined by Smart and colleagues (Smart *et al.*, 2012), friendships, like kinships, need to be negotiated with the engagement of different factors like affective and practical needs, duties and commitments. The ambivalence in Minglian's narrative presents such a negotiation process, focusing on roommates' caring and intimacy. Although caring is regarded by Minglian as one of the practices which "*made us [Minglian and his roommates] a bit like families*" (Minglian), his narrative about this experience reveals that intimacy-oriented interactions or the practices which help build dorm proximity can also bring these young people negative feelings. As a type of practice which promotes cohesion in the dorm, the ambivalent caring experience narrated by Minglian also demonstrates Komter's (2001) argument that solidarity is not always harmonious and cosy. In research on gift giving and solidarity formation, Komter (2001) suggested the negative experiences people can get from solidarity, like a sense of limitation and feeling compelled to conform, which is further embodied as the potential conflict in gift exchange and its reciprocity between personal expectations or understandings and exchanging experiences or rules in practice. This is

echoed by Yingying's narrative about her gift exchange experiences discussed in the last subsection. Yingying's also mentioned that not every gift she received made her happy, because sometimes she could not feel the meaning she wanted:

I received expensive makeup from my roommate on my birthday this year, but she did this just because I gave her a good makeup on her birthday, so she has to give me a good one too ... Giving birthday gifts in my dorm has transformed from simply giving blessings to returning favour. Before giving the gift, you have to make sure that your gift won't be cheaper than what she gave you, so I think it has lost its original significance. (Yingying, 03/05/2021)

As mentioned earlier, gifts have symbolic meanings involving personal relationships. According to Camerer (1988, p. S199), there are various illustrations of these meanings, like the giver's "*willingness to invest in a relationship*", the giver's preference or the giver's knowledge of the receiver's preference. Shedding light on this argument, Yingying's narrative reflects a disagreement between her and this roommate on the meaning of gifts. This also echoes the suggestion of Flynn and Adam (2009) that the givers may regard the high prices of gifts as a symbol of willingness to construct a bond, while the receivers may not think the same. Yingying wanted a present that demonstrated thought rather than a present chosen due to perceived expectations about cost. Furthermore, Yingying's experience also demonstrates that both Yingying and her roommate may not know much about each other's preferences, which causes incorrect "*guesses about tastes*" (Camerer, 1988, p. S199) reflected in the gifts, especially the one Yingying received. In this sense, although birthday gift-giving is maintained as a ritual to build and preserve cohesion in Yingying's dorm, keeping such a gift exchange interaction with that roommate offered Yingying negative emotional experiences.

In this way, the process of closeness construction and irritations discussed above reflect the interweaving between positive and negative experiences of social relationship negotiations in Chinese university student dorm living. However, as revealed by participants' accounts, this complex relational and emotional dorm living experiences do not just involve domestic issues, the institutional context also plays a role, and this is discussed in the next section.

5.2 Institutional Influences on Roommate Relationship Negotiations

Another key theme that emerged from the data is the ways in which the institutional environment forms an important part of the context shaping young people's roommate relationships. In Chapter 2, I discussed the role of context in the sociology of personal life, which highlights the embeddedness of individual agency in social, cultural and other connected environments (Smart, 2007). Following this approach, this section positions personal relationships within rather than separating them from the broader context (Adam and Allen, 1998). By interpreting college roommate relationships in the context of the Chinese university system, this section reflects on how the mundane shared living and relationship practices between participants and their roommates are regulated by their non-domestic interactions on campus and the university-enforced accommodation rules.

5.2.1 Shared lives and institutional contexts

Corporation and reciprocity during study

According to previous chapters, most Chinese undergraduates, including most of my participants, are assigned to live with their classmates in university dormitories. Even though some participants and their roommates are not classmates, they are studying the same degree or are at least based in the same department. In this way, what is shared between these participants and their roommates can include not only domestic life but also their institutional life. As revealed by the data, a high number of participants engage in all or part of their academic activities together with their roommates, due to the similarity and overlaps in many modules, homework and exams. For example, Yingying mentioned that attending lectures together is a collective activity shared between her and her roommates: *"All of us four go to lectures together from the dorm and come back together. We sit together during the lectures"*. Yingying also described these shared moments as *"propelling our relationships in a positive direction, making our relationship better and better"*. Yoyo narrated a similar experience in which she and her roommates would also save seats for each other if they could not go to the classroom together: *"those getting in earlier will select and hold several seats and wait for the later ones"* (Yoyo). As noted by Spencer and Pahl (2006, p. 90), university and colleges are important environments for friendship making, due to the frequency of interactions and shared *"age and interests"*. Thus, based on such rationale, the arrangement of university student accommodation is often described by researchers as a type of *"social opportunities afforded by higher education"* (Brooks and O'Shea, 2021, p. 6) and the friendships built in college student residences are regarded as *"simply fun companions"* (Spencer and Pahl, 2006, p. 90). Increased social opportunities and their effects are also presented in participants' accounts, particularly for those where all the

people in the dorm are together throughout the whole day – attending lectures and travelling to and from campus. These participants and their roommates often acted as a team both in residential and the wider institutional fields, intensifying feelings of companionship. However, this companionship is based on collective completion of the same academic task rather than just the fun aspects of campus social life. Minglian described this intensified companionship in more detail in his account, discussing how shared lecture time was embedded within everyday routines in his dorm:

We went to the lectures together from the dorm in the morning, because we all attend the same lectures. Sometimes some of us were too lazy to look at the time in the morning, so we often asked each other the time and confirmed whether we have to go. After the lecture, we would discuss what to eat for lunch and whether to play a video game together in the afternoon. (Minglian, 24/12/2020)

Attending the lectures together is part of Minglian's daily domestic routine with his roommates. They were not simply together at every moment throughout the day, but also continued to discuss and plan together to ensure that these shared practices went well. According to the data, more cooperation between roommates in shared institutional life occurred in homework completion and exam preparation. For example, according to Wei, he prepared for final exams and combatted distractions together with two of his roommates. Tong Chang, a female graduate participant, narrated a similar experience, including the sense of cohesion she obtained:

We prepare for the final exams together every semester ... We tested each other on the knowledge which might be examined to help each other to make a better review ... We were more harmonious during this time and facing this together made us closer. (Tong, 02/06/2021)

Huan discussed how he works with his roommates as a team to finish some group work and homework, mentioning how they collaborate to make the work efficient: *"we have a clear division in completing a presentation ... As for the problems in the homework, we just ask each other 'have you done this? Tell me how you did that'; that's convenient"*. As mentioned above, Huan and his roommates built a sense of mutual trust. In his comment, their cooperation in study is one of the sources of this bond. As suggested by Finn (2015), students can form group identity in shared living in university accommodation. The accounts of these collaborative experiences with the emerging closer ties shed light on this argument

but are based on these young people's shared academic life. Echoing Cronin's (2014) suggestions that people can build friendship through sharing work experiences that challenge their moods or physical power, the shared experiences of "facing" (Tong) exams and the difficulties of homework in these participants' narratives help them forge a sense of togetherness and caring in study, beyond household affairs.

Inspirations, a sense of security and relationship negotiation

As noted by Zhang and Pu (2017), living in assigned university accommodation and often spending a lot of time, including study time, with roommates is regarded as a contextual feature of students' college life in many Chinese universities, which makes a peer effect on college academic scores more likely to take place in Chinese HE. In my research, peer effects from college roommates on study are also seen in some participants' accounts. For instance, Mingyu discussed how he was inspired in study by a roommate in his previous dorm (he was reassigned to the current dorm [by the time of interview] in the second year, discussed in detail in the next chapter):

He is excellent and hard-working. He went to the library every day, which inspired me a lot and then I also liked going there. We studied together, which created a positive and mutually reinforcing effect. (Mingyu, 30/04/2021)

As mentioned by Davies (2019b), siblings can influence each other's attitudes to their educational studies through everyday interactions in a shared domestic environment. Similarly, Mingyu's "day-to-day observation and conversations" (Davies, 2019b, p. 220) with his roommate, particularly after class, were an opportunity to learn from that roommate the habits and approaches that could help improve his studies (Griffith and Rask 2014). However, there was also another type of effect related to study from roommates presented in Mingyu's account:

Sometimes my roommates and I could also find comfort in each other. For instance, when I bombed an exam, I was very upset, but when I found that another guy also bombed it or even worse, I would feel better. Of course, I will console him, but to be honest, I would not be that sad anymore. (Mingyu, 30/04/2021)

Getting a sense of security from roommates who are experiencing the same frustrations in their studies reflects a special emotional connection between these college roommates. It aligns with Brooks' argument that some college students compare academic grades with their college friends to ensure that they are on a similar track or at least they are "*not the only ones getting low marks*" (Brooks, 2007, p. 701). This homogeneity in academic performance also creates a sort of collective memory between these young people and tightens their sense of 'being together'.

Yanli Jiang, a female graduate participant, also discussed the peer effect on study in her dorm, reflecting on a clearer connection between the peer effect and the dorm intimacy:

I always asked a roommate an academic question and then we were closer and closer. We studied and played together ... Then she spent less time on study and we interacted less and less and were thus not that intimate ... She was excellent at studying at the beginning, but then she gave up her study ... You could clearly find that someone was less motivated than before ... (Yanli, 21/02/2021)

According to Allen (2011), making friends is also a process for self-identification, as how people perceive and describe who they are can be influenced by their friends. This is demonstrated by Yanli's narrative. The friendship Yanli describes with her roommate (above) was dependent on how her roommate oriented herself to her studies. When that roommate was not that hard-working, Yanli distanced herself because the friendship jeopardised her own identity as a hard-working student.

The discussions above reflect how institutional contexts help build friendships in dorms and how they positively shape these college roommates' living and wider HE experiences. Influenced by their identities as both roommates and classmates or sharing the same major, these young people develop a special solid bond between each other. As Mo Yu, a third-year female undergraduate said: "*roommates are the classmates with more intimacy*". From this perspective, these experiences reflect the positive functions of official student residential arrangement policies which require classmates to live together, discussed in Chapter 2. However, these contexts can also bring pressure and competitions. In some cases, they can also intertwine with or even accelerate other types of relational unease in everyday dorm living.

Studying together and roommate tensions

As previously observed, some participants can be inspired by their roommates in their studies. However, Jianning expressed ambivalent feelings about having roommates who did well in study: *“Living with them made the rest of us a bit stressful, we would feel guilty about ourselves every time we wanted to slack off in our studies. But it was good that we were inspired by them”*. Like Yanli and Mingyu, Jianning also drew inspiration from her roommates, but this inspiration was mixed with pressure, revealing more complex experiences brought by peer effects in dorm living. The ambivalent emotional negotiations related to academic issues in the dorm are also illustrated in Yusheng Guan's case. She always studied with her roommates, but they also competed. Sometimes, these complex relational experiences even impacted their interactions at private time in everyday dorm living. For example, Yusheng was mocked by her roommate for her habit of studying at night, which made her uncomfortable:

I could feel a secret rivalry between us ... this could be reflected in someone's language, she would say something to me when we chatted in the dorm like, ‘You study late at night every day, no wonder your marks are so good’. When she said this, her voice was dripping with sarcasm, which made me uncomfortable, I didn't know how to reply, so I just smiled ... However, on the other hand, it urged me to study harder. (Yusheng Guan, female, graduate, 30/06/2021)

Living together in a highly communal environment, Yusheng and her roommates faced academic competition, not just during daytime working hours but also in the evenings. Meanwhile, pressure was also extended from the classroom to the dormitory and overlapped with their negotiations in shared domestic life, which caused emotions like jealousy and resulted in confrontations. As revealed by Yusheng, her roommates and her were not just sharers living together and classmates studying the same courses, but also competitors in the same academic contests. Such a sense of competition in the atmosphere of Yusheng's dorm increased the ambivalence and intensity of her shared living relationships. On one hand, she was stimulated by this environment to work harder at her studies, but on the other hand, she also encountered tension in roommate relationship negotiations, which increased the discomfort to her residential life. A similar narrative about a sense of competition in roommate relationships is also presented in Huan's account. As I have discussed, Huan narrated his cooperation with his roommates during study, however, he also reflected that they could work together and help each other in homework, but not necessarily in exam preparation:

The essential study materials will of course not be shared ... Before the exam, it's no use to ask your roommates about the academic questions, particularly those important ones which are more likely to be examined, because others will also say that they don't know either. But after the exam, you will find that they lied. (Huan, 16/04/2021)

In Huan's narrative, he and his roommates are both collaborative and wary of each other in their studies. Although there is a kind of mutual help and trust, these interactions are limited by a sense of reservation and competition. Huan and his roommates clearly know that they can be partners in finishing their homework, but they are competitors when it comes to the exams. In this sense, the experiences of taking the same academic courses as roommates can be multifaceted for these young people, and the relevant solidarity is also selective. Apart from these complex and multidimensional relational and emotional experiences, Mingyu discussed in his accounts about a more severe situation in which a study-related issue directly caused a conflict between him and a roommate:

I asked Shangyu [Mingyu's roommate] to help me hand in a lab report to the teacher. He refused but then asked the other two roommates whether they needed him to help hand in the reports. I was shocked and angry and then we quarrelled. Afterwards, I secretly took away the dorm key we usually use from the door frame when he went out. Thus, he couldn't enter the dorm but just had to ask the administrator for help. He knew that it was me, so he cursed me in our dorm's QQ group¹ and then we quarrelled again in the dorm ... Finally, we stopped talking for half a semester. (Mingyu, 30/04/2021)

In Mingyu's story, refusing to help submit the report was the initial reason for the conflict, but it reflects Shangyu's different treatment of Mingyu and other roommates in everyday shared life: *"I always treated him as a bro, but he didn't do the same to me. I have felt this difference in other aspects in daily life, but he went too far this time"*, Mingyu said. Thus, the root cause of this study-related tension and Mingyu's revenge on Shangyu made this study-related conflict in their dorm interweave with the unease in their daily interactions in domestic living. In this sense, handling study-related issues became part of these young people's everyday interactions under the special institutional context, which can shape their relationships and

¹ Similar to a Facebook group.

emotions and even intensify or detonate the potential tension that accumulates in everyday shared dorm living.

The accounts above illustrate how these college roommates' relationships and emotional negotiations in everyday dorm living are influenced by their identities as both roommates and classmates and the overlap of their HE study and shared domestic living. As mentioned by Kaufman and Feldman (2004), college students (re)construct and reconstruct different aspects of their identity in various social settings on campus, ranging from the classroom to the dormitory to the assembly room. As noted earlier in this section, under the institutional context of Chinese universities, different social settings and relevant interactions interweave in one space. This environment makes these Chinese young people's HE experiences about self-identity and social relationships more complex. As discussed in Chapter 2, some Chinese researchers regard student competition as a reason for dormitory conflict (e.g., Liang, 2008; Wang and Wang, 2014; Zhang, 2019), but these situations are mentioned in passing or linked to certain improper behaviours among roommates in relation to unfair competition (see for example, Liang, 2008). However, the data I generated reveal that how academic competition and stress in relationship negotiations influence roommate relationships is an ambivalent and multifaceted process. My exploration also illustrates the greater impacts of the interweaving between these college roommates' institutional and residential lives on their tensions, which involves complex social and emotional experiences alongside academic competitions. In addition to study-related issues, the roles played by student residential rules created by universities are also revealed by many participants in their narratives of roommate relationships – this is discussed in the next section.

5.2.2 Roommate relationships and university accommodation rules

Apart from the overlap between these young people's institutional and residential lives, how university-created residential rules influence the relational negotiations in student dormitories was also discussed in some participants' accounts. For example, Jianning discussed how she and her roommates built intimacy through complying with the dormitory curfew together:

We had to return to the dorm by 10 pm every day ... I think it helped us conduct the closeness. Because of this rule, all of us would be back at around 9 pm, then we could chat till we slept. There was actually not much time for all of us to be together and communicate in the daytime. So, I think this rule offered us more chances to do this, it brought all of us together before bedtime. I think we would have even less time

to communicate without this rule, because some of us might be back very late.

(Jianning, 04/06/2021)

In Jianning's account, the 10pm curfew return time provided her and her roommates with more shared time in the shared living space, which gave them more chances to interact and thus brought them closer. Indeed, being together is important to the intimacy felt between many people and their roommates. However, as Heath and colleagues (Heath *et al.*, 2017) note, personal relationships are not just shaped by but also shape practices and patterns of time sharing. Although the mandatory curfew is common in many Chinese universities, the added interaction opportunities may not necessarily work in every dormitory, particularly for relationships like that between Ding and Mignyu, as discussed above, where they sought to avoid spending time together.

Jianning's account revealed a relatively idealised situation in which everyone complied with rules and developed intimacy in this process. Nevertheless, compliance with the residence rule in Jun's account was not so successful. According to Jun's narrative, there is a regular sanitary inspection of undergraduate dormitories in his university, requiring them to maintain the cleanliness and tidiness of the entire dormitory room, including everyone's desks and beds. However, all except one of his dorm mates would proactively finish the cleaning, which always annoyed others:

His bed is always very dirty and messy, but he would never pick it up if we didn't remind him. But the problem is, we are one; we would all fail if anyone's area cannot reach the requirement. So, he is the key point every time, if he can pass, we can absolutely pass. So, we keep urging him to clean his bed every time before the inspection. I'm a bit speechless at him, but we have got used to it. (Jun, 17/04/2021)

Jun's narrative reflects the importance of a collective response to the sanitary inspection and the difficulties that can arise if this cannot be achieved. Differences in the attitudes toward the sanitary inspection influence the collective preparation in his dorm. His roommate's laziness increases the difficulty of the preparation and causes unease among the others. However, urging this roommate to participate in the preparation for the benefit of all reinforced these young people's self-identity as roommates living together. They thus formed a sense of belonging to their dorm. In this way, this university rule still helps conduct cohesion between Jun and his roommates, which is also what Chinese college students are

expected to engage in by their universities (Li, H., 2006). Nevertheless, the emotional and relational negotiation in this process reflected in Jun's story, is ambivalent rather than just *"taking a burden"* and then *"forming a harmonious relationship"* (Li, H., 2006, p. 111).

Wei narrated an experience in which he charged his electric bicycle battery in the dorm but was found out and then secretly reported by one of his roommates to the administrator, which caused the temporary confiscation of Wei's bicycle. This is also a kind of compliance with the residence rule, as Wei did break the university's rule. However, Wei's case is more negative than that in Jun's, because Wei was secretly betrayed by his roommate, which directly caused a temporary loss of his possessions: *"If I knew it was him who report that to the administrator at that moment, I would be very angry, how could he do that!"*. Although Wei acknowledged that he did break the rule and he forgave his roommate when he apologised after a period of time, this negative relational experience contrasted with the concept of solidarity expected by the university. Meanwhile, forbidding the charging of things like electric bicycles in the dorm involves the safety of all the people in the dormitory building, thus this reporting behaviour is also for the collective benefit. But the lack of consideration of Wei's feelings also shows *"a lack of cohesion"* (Xianyu, 2016, p.78). Therefore, this residential rule can cause ambivalence among students not only in their relational negotiations but also in their formation of collective awareness or spirit as expected by official policies.

In some interviews, participants narrated experiences of collective rule breaking in their dorms. Like collective rule-keeping, this type of practice can also generate social bonds in the dorm. Zhen Ye, a first-year undergraduate, discussed how the residential rules added more subjects of discussion to the daily chat in his dorm:

We are not allowed to use high-power electric appliances in the dorm. We all understand that it's for our safety, but it really brings inconvenience to our daily life. We also think that some appliances like small freezers shouldn't be forbidden ... we complain about that together when we chat ... By complaining about the rule none of us are happy with, we all vent our dissatisfaction and get closer. (Zhen, 04/05/2021)

In Zhen's account, the residence rule not only provides a common topic for chat with his roommates and helps them communicate more, more importantly, it helps them conduct solidarity. Through expressing the same feeling about the same experience in the shared

living, these young people express shared opinions, which can make them more cohesive and help strengthen their sense of belonging to their roommate group. Meanwhile, some participants also narrated how they and their roommates worked together to break the university's residential rules:

Sometimes we would secretly have a hot pot together in the dorm. We were not allowed to do so, due to the prohibition of the high-power electrical appliances ... During our hot pot time, we would take turns to be on the lookout; once we found that the administrator was coming, we would immediately work together to hide the pot and clean up everything ... It promoted our communication. Without it, we would have even less time to chat, let alone communicate. (Yusheng, 30/06/2021)

In Yusheng's story, having hot pot together is a collective activity which can promote intimacy, like other food practices discussed in the first section. Nevertheless, working together to use the forbidden appliance and keep it secret can make this activity more significant to these young people, because they not only had fun together, but also banded together to guarantee the smoothness of this shared time. Through these two pathways, these girls could become much closer to each other. Secretly having hot pot together in Yusheng's account reveals a collaboration in these people's communal recreation. Lin also narrated how he and his roommates kept the secrets of using the prohibited appliances for each other:

Sometimes some of us would secretly use some banned electric appliances to make life more convenient. But we helped each other every time to ensure that these appliances wouldn't be found by the administrator ... These collective experiences had a positive influence on our relationships. In fact, I didn't realise this influence until this interview. I suddenly found that we really got closer through these things we did as a group. (Lin, 06/02/2021)

As reflected in this account, the situation of rule breaking in Lin's dorm is like that in Wei's story, but Lin's experience resulted in cohesion rather than betrayal, particularly demonstrated in Lin's emphasis on "*things we did as a group*". Lin's account also reveals that this sense of belonging and collective cognition grew as an unexpected consequence of rule breaking, as it was not realised by Lin until the interview. Similarly, Yang Yang, a female graduate participant, discussed how the people of her dorm who came back late climbed over the back wall with the help of others to return to the dorm, but she described her feeling at that moment as "*good collaboration, but not that special*". Nevertheless, when talking

about what she thinks of the residential rules, she said without hesitation, “*We secretly broke the rules together*”, bonding her and her roommates in the actions of rule breaking.

Like organisational issues, residence rules can also play a role in social relationships in university student dormitories. These young people can build a sense of cohesion by working together to comply with the rules, although sometimes they can also feel ambivalent about this process. However, sometimes there are also negative experiences like roommates' betrayal. Unexpectedly, there are also collaborations and mutual help between roommates to complain about or even break the rules, which created another sort of collective cognition. As examined in Chapter 2, the collectivistic practices in mundane life in China are argued to be more flexible and relational (Yang, 2015; Yang, 2018). In line with these suggestions, these accounts about navigating a university's residential rules reflect that these college roommates can build a sense of collective belonging and group spirit through various and unpredictable pathways in their multifaceted relationship negotiations in dorm living.

The sections above demonstrate the need to include institutional context and wider lives into the analysis of roommate relationship negotiations in Chinese university dormitories. These young people can build intimacy in various ways, but their experiences of closeness can also be fragile and slip into uncertainty and tension. How these difficulties are managed was also narrated by many participants and is discussed in the next section.

5.3 Managing Tensions

According to the data, many participants reacted in a salient or forgiving way to dormitory tensions. On one hand, this reveals critical associations and ambivalent emotional ties between some participants and their roommates (Smart, 2007; Heaphy and Davies, 2012). On the other hand, some practical considerations are also presented in some comments, involving the institutional environment and the “*public story*” (Finn, 2015, p. 76) in Chinese HE, for example, about the university's limits on leaving or changing dorms, the perceptions on dorm conflicts held by universities, the government and even wider society, the benefits from working together with roommates in daily life and studies. Based on one or more practical reasons, many participants developed a disposition as ‘being socially smart’ to manage tensions in dorm living. To some participants, communication and humour are key strategies used to ease tension, but these tactics are not always available for everyone. Sometimes when communications fail or it is too hard to accept the dorm atmosphere,

maintaining a relational and emotional distance from roommates can work better – trying to avoid the irritation as much as possible without intensifying the conflict.

5.3.1 Moderate management of tensions

Emotional ties and tension management

In some stories, the co-existence of intimacy and tension is more obvious and more ambivalent emotions are reflected. As reflected in previous sections, Wei's interactions with his roommates are not always experienced as supportive and there is also a difficult aspect, which makes their relationships a kind of "critical associations" (Davies and Heaphy, 2011, p. 6). Influenced by the coexistence of both the positive and negative experiences, Wei said he feels *"love but also hate"* for his roommates. Similarly, in the narrative about a roommate's arrogance in relation to cleanliness, Yingying highlighted her dislike of that roommate's behaviour, but she chose to be tolerant: *"I think she actually wanted to help, she wanted to do something good for us, but just in a wrong way... I didn't want to dispute at that moment because we are friends"*. In this sense, she reflects an ambivalent emotion to this annoyance in the dorm. On the one hand, she felt irritated about her roommate, but on the other, she emphasised her roommate's kindness and showed understanding of that behaviour. Yingying's attitudes show the influence of the traditional and idealised concept of friendship, which says it should be supportive and joyful (Smart *et al.*, 2012). According to her narrative, Yingying's tolerance emerged because she learnt more about her roommate and was able to understand the irritating behaviour better, based on more positive things she knows about that roommate. Nevertheless, the negative feelings she got from that experience also reflect the critical character of the friendship. Meanwhile, in Yingying's interview, she talked a lot about the intimacy between her roommates and her in other aspects of the shared living.

Wei presented similar narratives in which his feelings about the same person could change in different aspects or moments of dorm living, because both people and everyday interactions are multifaceted. For example, he was irritated by the betrayal of one of his roommates in the electric bicycle event mentioned above - he also felt that roommate *"always says what he wants to others, regardless of the time and occasion"*. However, Wei also mentioned his sense of proximity to that roommate because they *"have many hobbies in common"* and they can always *"hit it off"* in dorm decoration. In Wanyin's previously mentioned case, she said that her roommates always left the cleaning work of the dorm to her and she was not very happy. However, she still did the cleaning without any complaint

and felt accepting of this: *"That's fine, it's just in the aspect of cleaning, but I'm still happy with them in other aspects"*.

Reflected in the narratives above and in previous sections, the ambivalence formed in multifaceted everyday dorm interactions can make the relationship negotiations in dormitories more complex, but the existence of positive experiences can also help moderate some college roommates' negative emotions around tensions and then influence their reactions. In some cases, like the previously discussed Minglian's experience of taking care of a drunk roommate, his annoyed feeling about that roommate was mitigated by a sense of responsibility, which also made him tolerate that roommate and keep caring for him. These emotional ties, although emerging in different circumstances, can make college roommates more generous in their attitudes and reactions to difficult situations that arise in their relationship negotiations (Smart *et al.*, 2012).

However, according to these participants' interviews, being tolerant always occurred alongside or was based on effective communications in general daily interactions. For instance, Yingying would communicate with her roommates when she was disturbed by them at night and always got good results - she stressed that *"we can understand each other in almost every moment, everyone is quite easy-going"*. These successful communications helped her build proximity and trust with her roommates and thus still established understanding about her roommate's difficult actions. According to Wei's account, what helped him ease the annoyance caused by roommates was not just emotional ties but also everyday communications; successful communication helped Wei gain an emotional balance to avoid the *"love but also hate"* relationship becoming a purely hate relationship.

The importance of communication in tension management was also mentioned by other participants. For instance, Anli talked about communication when evaluating a conflict she witnessed between two of her roommates: *"If you are unhappy with someone, you can talk to her, you can communicate, but you don't need to be like that [complaining about each other and interacting less]"*. Like Anli, communicating with roommates to deal with disagreement was also useful for Mingyu in relational negotiations in his previous dorm: *"everyone was willing to frankly communicate with each other about the difference in lifestyles and make compromises"*. As reflected in both narratives, communication means not just an exchange, but more importantly mutual understanding and compromise which are of significance to the consolidation of emotional ties and the easing of tensions.

Humour and tension management

In the narratives about forms of communications to manage tensions, some participants particularly mentioned humour. For example, Boju Fu, a male graduate participant, narrated how he used humour to ease tension in a short time: *“Something went wrong with our collaboration in study, not a big problem but it made my roommate unhappy and I could clearly see that angry expression on his face... I joked with him and tried to make him laugh, then he laughed and we reconciled shortly”*. Zhen talked about the role played by humour in not only tension management but also the development of relational styles in his dorm:

It's quite normal for us to have some small disputes in daily life, but we can often solve these soon just by ridiculing each other ... we often joke with each other, and we feel free with each other ... One of my roommates doesn't like others sitting in his bunk, so we often say to him like 'be nice to us or we will sit in your bed' ... sometimes even we cannot solve the unhappy things immediately, we could always forget about it automatically the next day and are together again like before, our closeness would not be broken ... (Zhen, 04/05/2021)

As noted by Kuipers (2015, p. 4), humour can *“bring people closer to each other, embarrass, ridicule, cause to reflect, relieve tension, or put serious affairs into perspective”*. Aligned with this argument, Boju's account about humour displays a 'successful exchange of joking and laughter' (Kuipers, 2015, p. 7). Boju used humour to show his expectation of making his roommate happy again and restoring their bond, and this expectation was agreed by that roommate, reflected in his laughter.

In Zhen's account, humour is applied more frequently. Zhen and his roommates use humour to interact in daily life and ease tensions, helping them form a sense of proximity based on which they can make fun of each other with less worry. Zhen also highlighted the strength of this humour-based intimacy in his dorm, even though there were negative experiences in their interactions, including that caused by humour. By describing the tensions in his dorm living as 'small disputes' which would not take them much time or energy to manage, Zhen's narrative reflects a concept like the *“small things”* in shared household discussed in the research by Heath and colleagues (Heath *et al.*, 2017, p. 100), whereby many annoyances related to sharers in a household can be forgotten. As Heath *et al* (2017, p. 100) showed, the attitude of *“small things”* towards the irritations in shared households mainly exist in transient

shared living with unstable stays and high turnover of sharers. However, in a different shared living context in which the stays are longer, fixed and mandatory, the generous emotion revealed by the description of 'small' disputes given in Zhen's account is more of a demonstration of the intimate, free and humorous style of shared living in his dorm – they often regard roommate tensions as ordinary and casually manageable.

Like Zhen, Yoyo also demonstrated the interaction style in her dorm, with humour at its core, particularly reflected in narratives about shared experiences, as noted in the previous section. Yoyo also said in her account that they can always deal with unhappiness quickly within this free and humorous atmosphere:

The more we play together and do this [making fun of each other], the closer we are ... By now we have never been in conflict with each other, even though there may be unhappiness at some time, we could usually solve it in a second ... Sometimes the jokes may be out of control and make someone unhappy, but we could quickly change the topic, or just say sorry at most, then everything will usually be fine, everyone will be happy again.' (Yoyo, 22/04/2021)

The accounts of Boju, Zhen and Yoyo reflect that humour can be a handy and efficient approach to ease tensions with roommates during dorm living. Although their accounts show the effectiveness of humour in dormitory tension management, as argued by Kuipers (2015), humour may not work for every person or in every circumstance. As suggested by Norrick and Spitz (2010), whether humour can effectively help manage conflicts in communications is influenced by a range of issues, like the severity of conflicts and the forms of humour. According to these two researchers (Norrick and Spitz, 2008), humour is more likely to work in conflicts which are not very serious or have lower personal stakes; being humorous from the beginning of the interaction can be more useful to help ease disputes and prevent potential conflict escalation. As narrated by the three participants, the irritations eased by humour are not serious issues with severe influences on their everyday life or personal stakes. In the accounts of Zhen and Yoyo, the humorous interactions are used throughout their communications from the start, which worked well in terms of tension management. However, according to all the interviews in my research, the humorous interaction pattern was not common among the dorm groups I explored.

Due to these limits or preconditions, the functions of humour may be restricted if the dorm is not dominated by humorous interaction patterns, especially if the roommate conflicts are

more serious. For example, in Wei's narrative about his roommate who always makes noise in the dorm by playing video games and shouting as he plays, Wei and other roommates once imitated that roommate's voice and accent to highlight his behaviours: *"We do these in a funny way ... he doesn't feel angry at all and even guided us on the imitations ... it gradually becomes a kind of joy among us, sometimes it makes him not that annoying, at least at this moment."* Nevertheless, Wei still highlighted the disturbance caused by this roommate's noise. In this sense, although the humorous reactions to roommate's annoying behaviours can lessen the impacts of their interactions and thus partly ease the tension, humour does not help reduce the discomfort and dissatisfaction of Wei and other roommates in other aspects of dorm living and the tension thus still exists and continues to irritate them. Furthermore, Wei said that these noises negatively impacted them in their study and sleep in the dorm. His narrative reflects the seriousness of these noises, due to their connections to key activities in dorm living, academic issues and personal health. Therefore, compared with the experiences narrated by Boju, Zhen and Yoyo, the tension demonstrated by Wei shows higher severity issues and humour can only temporarily mollify the emotions at certain moments. As Wei mentioned in his account, his roommate's noisy behaviours and disturbances are eased mainly owing to their constant conversations and debates with that roommate, directly telling him their feelings and discussing solutions.

'Being socially smart' and tension management

In addition to a range of strategies to manage tensions, a disposition emerged from many participants' accounts that I summarised as 'being socially smart'. With this attitude, these young people are more pragmatic in their approach to the shared dorm living and roommate relationships - they tend to manage dorm tensions in generous and calm ways. For example, Huan explained his perceptions on tension management in shared dorm living:

Nothing can 100% satisfy you. You should make sure what is more important to you and what is less ... you can sacrifice something less important for something more important if necessary. I'm disturbed by the noise caused by my roommates – I feel unhappy, but I won't intensify the tension and break our closeness, because we get along well and can help each other in other aspects – that is more important to me. So, I tried to communicate but sometimes just bear with it. (Huan, 16/04/2021)

Huan's narrative reflects a kind of choice between his different personal needs, based on practical considerations of his shared dorm living. In Huan's interview, he told of the

togetherness and mutual help between he and his roommates in other aspects of their shared living, particularly their cooperation in studying, discussed above. To maintain the cohesion and reciprocity that is created in these ways, Huan controlled his discontent emotions and tried to be more tolerant of his roommates' noises. Like Huan, Jianning also emphasised the practical situation when she discussed her strategies for the noise and light disturbance caused by her roommates:

I just adjusted my lifestyles ... I wore earplugs and an eye mask when sleeping at night rather than talking with them about these issues, because I was the only one being disturbed due to my personal habits ... I didn't think I could manage to make the other three roommates change their lifestyles for me. (Jianning, 04/06/2021)

Jianning's narrative shows her compromise and adaptation to communal dorm living. Although she mentioned the necessity of communication in other parts of dorm living, she did not use it to deal with noise and light issues at night, considering that she was the minority who are different from most people in the dorm in terms of the sleep habits. Similar calm attitudes underpinned by practical thinking are also present in the narratives of tension management in other interviews: for instance, Wei said, *"If you want a comfortable shared living, you need to be compatible with and understand your roommates and address the problems you encounter in your interactions in a relaxing way... if you cannot change others, then try changing yourself or adapting to this situation"*. Similarly, Wanyin believes that *"If you want to get along well with others in a shared dorm, the first thing you should do is bearing with them... sometimes you also need to consider the possible results of your actions"*. Moreover, as Boju narrated, *"I didn't like conflicting with others, and I was always the first to reconcile when there were tensions in dorm living... the conflicting living atmosphere would make me uncomfortable"*. A similar comment was made by Lin, *"It's unnecessary to make the tension happen, is that any good? We still must live together every day, living in such an atmosphere would be stifling"*.

These perceptions on tension management illustrate the orientations of self-restraint, being generous to roommates and being adaptive to a collective living environment or lifestyles. In these accounts, these orientations are widely linked to the tenet of maintaining harmony rather than intensifying tensions or triggering severe conflicts. Nevertheless, these orientations are opted for based on these participants' understandings of the communality and fixability of their dorm living and the complex interplay of roommate relationships. According to the above accounts, these participants know that they are living in a highly

shared environment where they are both spatially and socially tied up with their roommates; their relationships with their roommates thus form a core part of their residential life and should be considered in their dorm living plans. Some participants like Lin particularly mentioned their awareness of the rule-bound character of dorm living, which limits their choices, like moving out of the dorm or changing roommates, and thus usually means annoying roommates are inescapable. On this basis, they know they need to find relational and emotional balances between themselves and their roommates, to find the most comfortable path for the inevitable four years of dorm living. Through the balancing and selecting process, they form or develop the notions and detailed strategies of 'being socially smart' and generally regard confrontations as unnecessary issues that can cause more discomfort.

Reflected in these young people's accounts, they are gaining or have gained an awareness or approach to consider roommates and the bonds in the collective aspect in dorm living, thus they are able to control their own moods and desires in tension management, as they are required by the wider authorities and contexts (e.g., Nelson and Chen, 2007; Li, H., 2006; Ministry of Education of China, 2004; China Youth Daily, 2013). However, the priority of the collective selected by these young people is supported by more practical and contextual considerations (Walker and Moran, 1991; Triandis, McCusker and Hui, 1990), including both communal and individual needs. As discussed in Chapter 2, it was suggested by many researchers that Chinese collective culture underlines their integration and balance rather than separation or opposition between the individual and group (see for example Wang and Liu, 2010). This argument is demonstrated by these young people's 'socially smart' notions. Their comprehensive concerns for their social relationships, dorm atmosphere and wider institutional limits also suggest that they see roommate interactions as "*relational transactions rather than abstract rules of obligation*" (Finn, 2015, p. 32), based on which they gain the tools of tension management to survive life in shared university dormitories.

5.3.2 Distance and head-on confrontation

Although the moderate attitudes and strategies above are understood by many participants as helpful for tension management, there are also some cases in which these approaches did not work so well, which thus caused confrontations or social and emotional distances in the dorm. As noted above, many participants do not think that erupting clashes or maintaining a hostile atmosphere can effectively solve irritations between roommates. Thus, these approaches are often mentioned as alternatives, or at least not plan-A, in their

approaches to tension management. For example, as I discussed before, Ding's roommates always caused noise and a bad air and atmosphere in the dorm but were also uncommunicative. To deal with this situation, Ding kept a distance from his dorm:

I usually stayed outside the dorm to study and just went back to sleep at night. Even though sometimes I didn't want to study, I would rather talk to someone else in the library than go back to the dorm ... I was at a disadvantage, because I was different from all of them in terms of lifestyle. It's too difficult for me to fight against everyone ... it's hard to really solve the problems they caused. (Ding, 01/06/2021)

As observed earlier, Jianning also reflected that she was the only one who suffered from her roommates' disturbances at night. While her narrative shows her willingness to maintain togetherness with roommates, Ding reveals a desire to reduce or avoid interactions with his roommates. Ding's account displays a sense of self-isolation from annoying issues, based on the living environment and roommates he "disliked at all" (Ding) and the tensions he failed to ease. Similar isolating actions are taken by Mingyu toward his noisy roommates and the dorm atmosphere which he felt unable to integrate into, when he found that few things could be changed by communications: "When I meet with problems, I would try to communicate with the person first. But if it doesn't work, then it's not worth talking or interacting with him anymore... I played it cool.". According to Mingyu, he seldom stays in the dorm and chats less with roommates in general. Although he must be in the dorm at night, he often stays alone on the balcony or in his own bed with the bed curtain closed. The behaviours of Ding and Mingyu are similar to the idea of "getting through" the shared living noted by Heath and colleagues (Heath *et al.*, 2017, p. 109), which is different from the activities of "getting on" and focusing on minimal shared time and development of closeness between housemates.

Maintaining a distance from the dorm discussed in these two accounts also demonstrates the strategy of constructing "superficial harmony" and "hidden disharmony", seen as a common way of managing interpersonal conflicts in China (Huang, L.-L., 2016, p. 4). By maintaining peace in the dorm, these young people can avoid potential risks brought by direct confrontations in the residential atmosphere and maintain a normal life in the highly communal environment for a period which is neither short nor flexible. This also illustrates a 'socially smart' way of thinking. Nevertheless, as opposed to those who tended to continue or develop intimacy with roommates and those who eased the tensions through communication or maintained a degree of comfortable living through acts of tolerance, these

participants mentioned above still experience tension and show less intent to build intimate ties with their roommates. Based on the maintenance of this status, they use indifference to show a silent opposition to their roommates and they also keep away from the dorm group as much as possible to make themselves comfortable during their college years.

Different from the veiled conflicts discussed above, Yaping Huang, a male graduate participant, narrated an explicit conflict that happened between him and his roommates when he was annoyed by their behaviours beyond endurance:

Two guys in my dorm always played video games and made a lot of noise, which badly disturbed my sleep. At first, I communicated with them, but they told me they were unhappy with my request – they didn't want to be quiet. Then I couldn't take it anymore and quarrelled with one of them ... I shouted my dissatisfaction out very loudly. I let them know I was very angry. After that, they clearly restrained themselves ... We should respect each other but I'm not a pushover. (Yaping, 03/07/2021)

According to Yaping's narrative, an argument was not his first choice, but it unexpectedly helped him deal with the annoying issue. In this sense, the conflict was not just escalated tension, but also a strong way to negotiate this tension and address the discomfort caused by Yaping's roommates. More importantly, this conflict is a strategy to rebuild the relational and emotional balance broken by the failed communication and the constant intrusion and disrespect of his roommates. In this sense, Yaping's experience illustrates that negotiating tensions is neither a static nor fixed process, just like the establishment of intimacy. Moreover, his narrative also shows that tension management can be circumstance-based and unpredictable, which is a more complex situation than is presented in policies, official publicity or current research and thus it cannot be simply defined as right or wrong.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed findings about how young people negotiate social relationships in their dormitories in Chinese universities. College roommates can create dormitory intimacy through various shared routines and rituals. Sometimes proximity can also be built through care practices. However, irritations can emerge with the development of togetherness, and some intimacy related experiences themselves can also cause ambivalence and uncertainty. Apart from the domestic field, the institutional environment can also play an important role in

these relational and emotional negotiations. Based on this wider contextual influence beyond shared household living, young people can form and consolidate “*a sense of group belonging*” (Finn, 2015, p. 87) in various ways, but they can also meet with more complexity and uncertainty in this process.

Being both roommates and classmates due to the special roommate allocation methods in most Chinese universities, these young people can find more chances to extend their togetherness in study and promote intimacy. But this process can also add ambivalence, pressure or a sense of competition to their relationships. In addition, the rules and limits created by the university on students' accommodation can also shape these college roommates' relationship negotiations. Adhering to the regulations together can help shape dormitory cohesion, but sometimes this process can cause disagreement or something even worse. Sometimes college roommates can develop cohesion by complaining about or breaking the rules together.

To the tensions caused by various problems of and beyond the shared domestic living, many participants displayed emotional generosity, presenting forgiveness and endurance to the irritations caused by their roommates. These can involve relational and emotional ties with their roommates, but there are also practical reasons reflected in many interviews, including restrictions from university rules and the overlap with roommates in different aspects of university life. In some cases, humour can be useful to ease tensions, but this does not always work in every situation. Many participants raised the notion of ‘being socially smart’, generated, emphasised or strengthened in their negotiations of shared dorm living. This idea is interlinked with their understanding of their residential contexts and relational status and supports most of their pragmatic and togetherness-oriented reactions to dorm tensions. When communications fail or there is less possibility for integration, relational and emotional distance from roommates can be more helpful for some participants to keep their personal life comfortable and to avoid intense conflict. Like constructing proximity, managing tensions can also bring these young people complicated experiences. In my interviews, these relational and emotional practices and approaches were shown across different genders and social backgrounds.

As I examined in Chapter 2, much Chinese literature about college roommate relationships focuses more on conflicts and tends to offer individualised or psychological oriented understandings of these social relationships (e.g., Zhu and Zhu, 2011; Liang, 2008), but there is a lack of an integral lens on how these young people construct social relationships in

their shared dorm living and their interplay with wider institutional and sociocultural contexts. Moreover, there is always a link between the dormitory conflict and students' lack of collectivistic awareness or incorrect forms of socialising in Chinese studies (e.g., Huang and Gou, 2016; Xianyu, 2016), based on official policies and stances. However, it is important to explore how these young people think of their communal living and how they react to the tension in their lifeworld. From an empirical perspective, this chapter reveals more multifaceted dimensions of these young people's relationships; it also demonstrates the association between these young people's perceptions on their shared living and their attitudes towards tensions.

As illustrated in this chapter, these young people are acquiring or have acquired the competences they are expected to get through dorm living in many cases, but shared living in practice is more multifaceted, dynamic and contextual than the idealised types widely highlighted and publicised by Chinese universities and researchers. In the process of dorm living, many of these young people, both those with and without siblings, gained or applied their own insights into the relational and emotional negotiations of collective living, trying to maintain a balance between themselves, their roommates and the wider policy environment.

In Chapter 3, I discussed the importance of the concepts of relationality to my research. In this chapter, I explained the findings by engaging with the main concepts of relationality like relational perspective (Finn, 2015), critical friendships (Heaphy and Davies, 2012) and arguments generated in relational lens in the fields of shared living (Heath *et al.*, 2017) and students' friendships in higher education (see for example Brooks, 2007). On these bases, I demonstrated the complex student social relationships in shared dorm living in Chinese universities. Additionally, my thesis extended these suggestions by discussing how the roommate practices and relationship formations in shared dorm living are shaped by the distinctive institutional environment of Chinese universities and the wider policy and sociocultural context. As reflected in the interviews, alongside these contexts, the material environments of university dorms are also of central importance to these young people's negotiations of roommate relationships, which I turn to discuss in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 6 The Materiality of Relationship Negotiation in the Dormitory

Introduction

In this research, all participants not only narrated how they interacted with their college roommates, but also described how they felt about the material environment of their dorms. As discussed in Chapter 3, every participant drew one or more emotion maps of the dorm(s) they were living or lived in, many participants also offered photos of their dorms. These textual and visual data together reflect both the social and material aspects of these young people's dorm living. More importantly, most of these data reveal how negotiating social relationships is associated with the material space and objects in dorm living. Shedding light on the concept of material culture and following Woodward's (2020) argument that things are integrated into the social relationships, these findings reflect how the physical environment and possessions in the university dorms shape and are shaped by college roommates' mundane interactions and their relational and emotional exchanges.

According to the data, the interplay between the social and material lives of these young people is presented differently in different spaces and objects in their dorms. Based on this, there are three forms and spaces of materiality emerged. Firstly, while the personal bunk or loft-bed area is usually regarded as a private personal space, it can also be a social site which generates dormitory bonds. Secondly, the balcony space works both as a social area for some people and as another personal space for retreat due to its almost outside the dorm location and the sense of release participants felt they had there. Thirdly, communal spaces (like the central areas of the dorm), public facilities and private things which directly involve sharing actions can help develop closeness and create collective memories but can also cause tensions. These three sites demonstrate that the interpersonal relationships, the architecture of the residential space and the function and sources of certain possessions engage with each other and together form young people's living experience in their dorms. In other words, roommate relationships are not just about the interactions and feelings among people but are also shaped by surrounding materialities. As noted in Chapter 3, these physical factors and the social life they can generate (Smart, 2007; Woodward, 2020) are central to understanding dorm relationships. Thus, this chapter explores these issues and draws on the main debates and more detailed literature about the materiality in personal life and shared living.

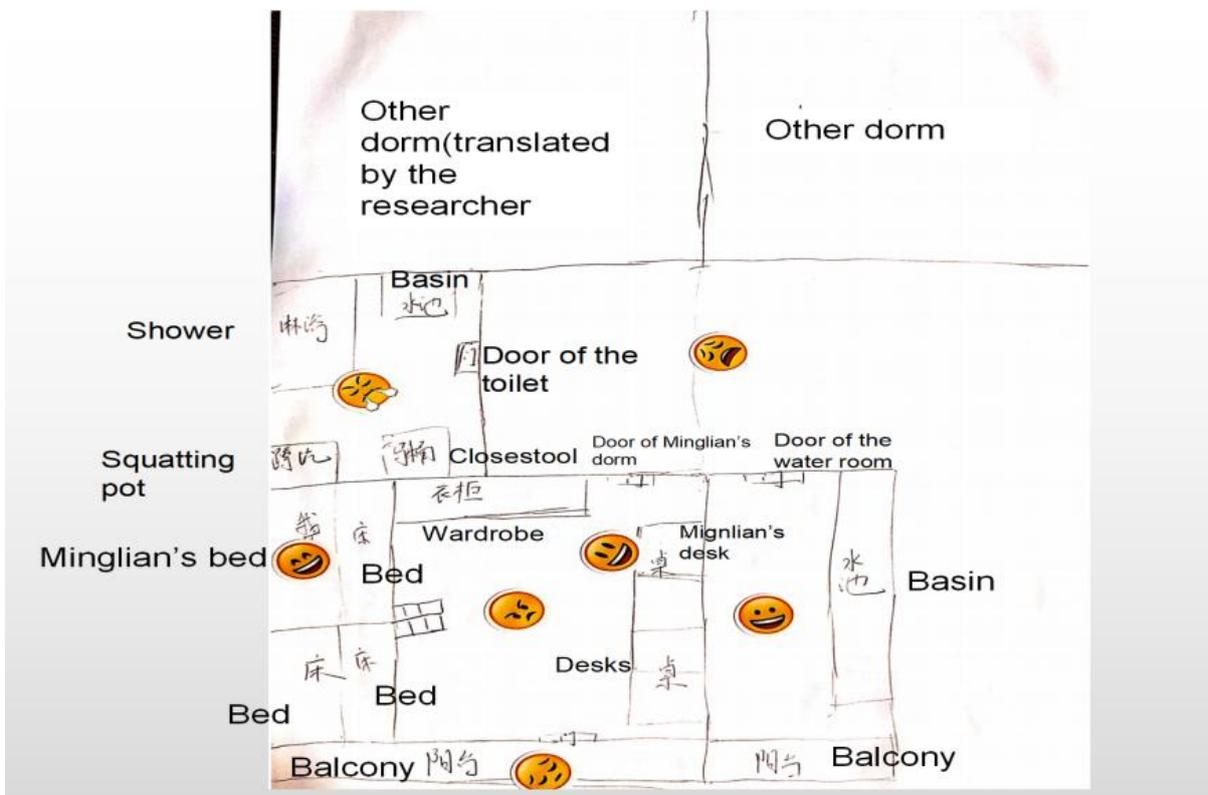
This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section focuses on the personal bunk or loft-bed areas, reflecting how young people organise such a private space through their practices around bed curtains and individualised decorations and facilities and how this place and objects play roles in their relational negotiations in the dorm. In the second section, I explore how the balcony works as a place of solitude or a social area in different dorms and how it is associated with these young people's emotional and relational experiences. The last section reveals how these young people and their roommates share public spaces, including central areas and dorm bathrooms, and how these places play roles in their solidarity or tension. This section also focuses on a few special communal areas like the independent study room, discussing how they can help manage dorm conflicts, as reflected in the data.

6.1 Personal Bunk/Loft-Bed Spaces: Curating Private Retreats and Negotiating Roommate Relationships

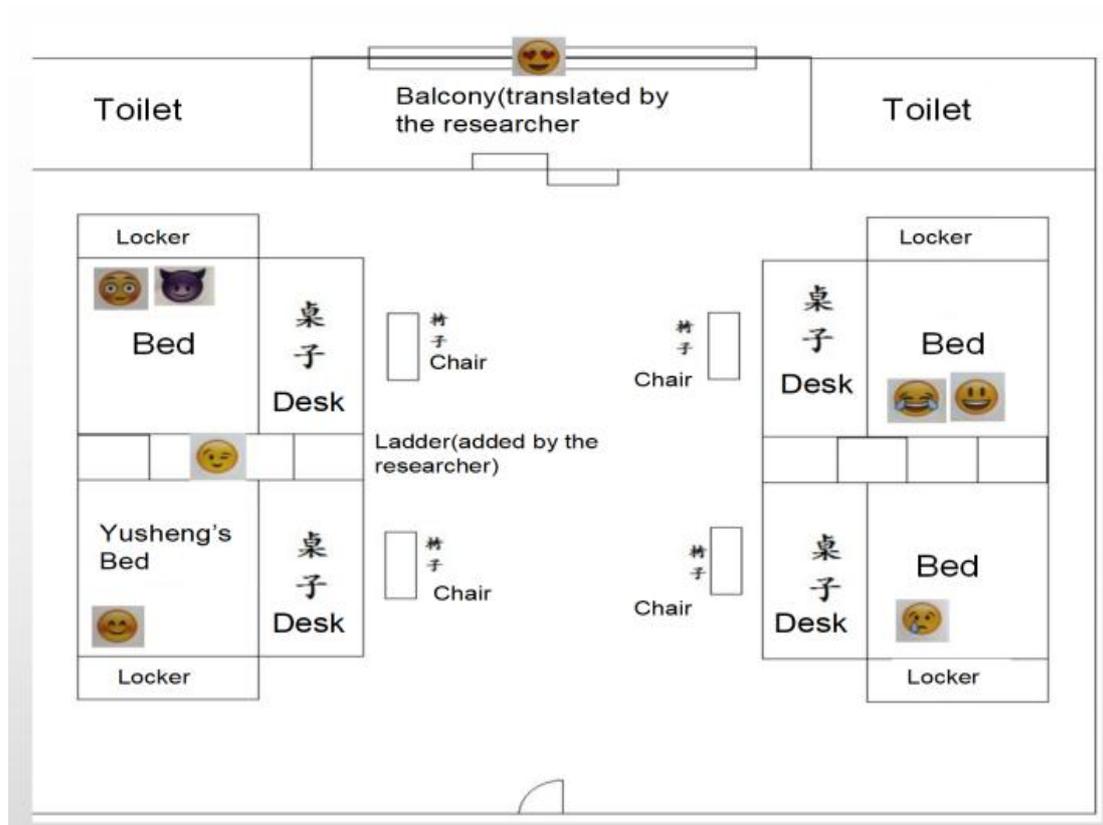
This section focuses on personal bunk/loft spaces as narrated much by most participants in their accounts. In the university dormitory where the roommates live in one room, the personal bunk or loft-bed area meets many participants' needs for a relatively more private space where they can be freer to maintain their privacy and enjoy their individual life. In the interviews, participants often used phrases like *"my little world"* (Mingyu, male, second year) or *"my own corner where I can do everything I want"* (Ying, male, first-year) or *"my own territory"* (Feng, male, graduate) to describe this space to reflect its sense of exclusivity. Meanwhile, most participants put emoticons on their own bunk or loft-bed areas in their emotion maps and most showed positive emotions, like being relaxed and happy. For example, Mingyu, Minglian (male, graduate) and Yusheng (female, graduate) all put 'happy' emoticons in this area on their emotion maps to display these comfortable feelings. In contrast, Yongming Liu, a third-year male undergraduate student, put various emoticons on his own bunk in his emotion map (see Yongming's map below) - all are used to describe his private experiences there without interacting with roommates, demonstrating a close connection between his private life and his bunk:



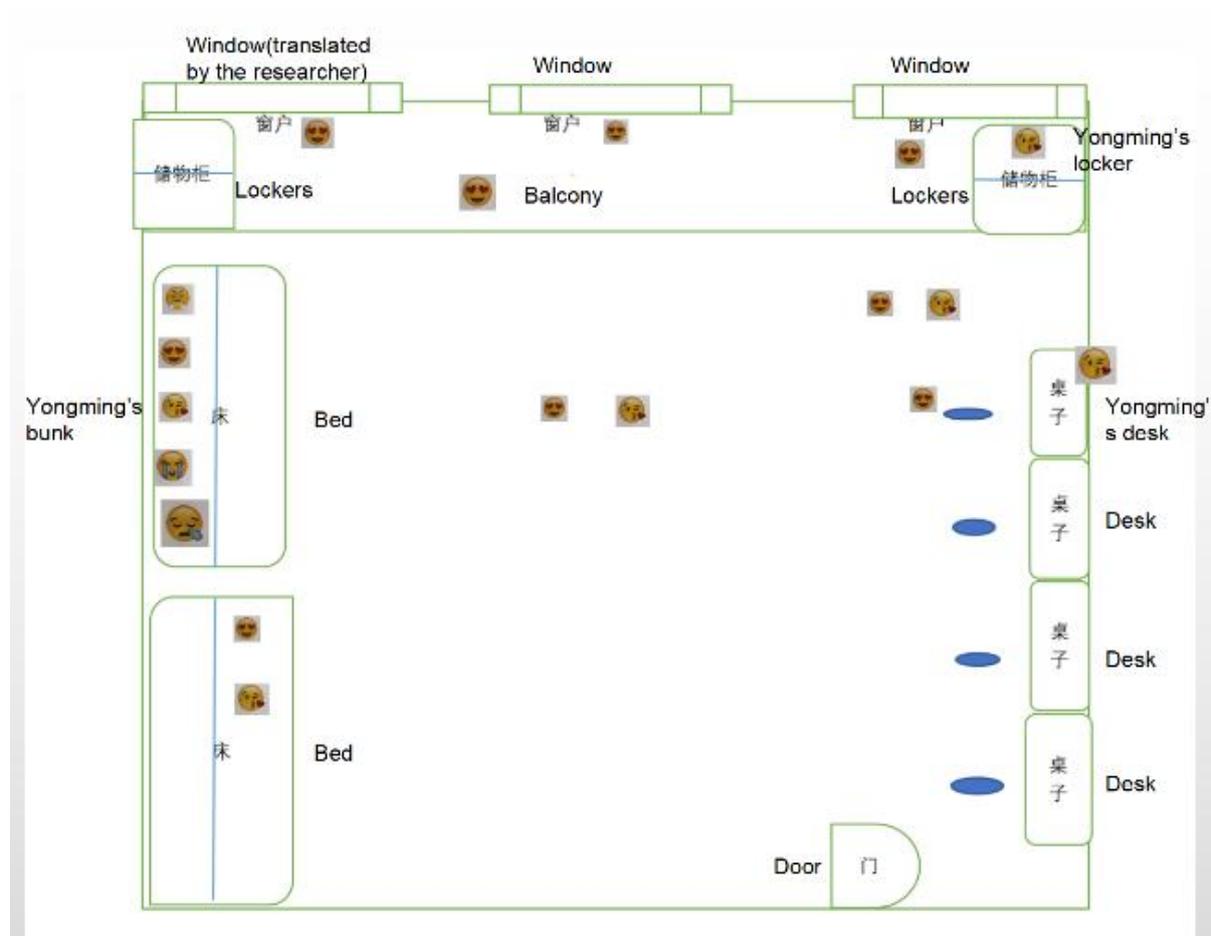
Map 2: Mingyu's current dorm



Map 3: Minglian's dorm



Map 4: Yusheng's dorm



Map 5: Yongming's dorm

Many of the participants (see the photos of Mingyu, Wanyin [female, third year] and Chen [male, graduate] as examples) also offered photos to show their personalised curation on their bunk areas. Analysing both the textual and visual data, the bed curtains and personalised decorations or facilitates arranged by participants themselves play important roles in the organisation of the personal bunk or loft-bed space, shaping and revealing the independence and privacy of these areas and also participants' individuality. Bed curtains are a kind of small curtain which can be hung around the bed to block out light. Sometimes they are used to prevent people or things on the bed from being seen, to maintain a private space. These individual arrangements help create a kind of personal retreat from the highly shared dorm space, which interweaves with specific dorm design or furnishing and multifaceted roommate practices to shape the relationship negotiations in dorm living in various ways.

6.1.1 Bed curtains

Bed curtains for privacy and controlling light

According to some participants, the bed curtain is important for privacy. For instance, Yoyo (female, first year) explained: *“my sleeping posture in summer is not very good and I think there should be something private”* and Jianning (female, graduate) shared that *“although we are all females, it was not very comfortable for me to be seen when I change my clothes; it’s a sort of privacy”*. How their needs for privacy are fulfilled on beds with the curtains closed echoes the basic functions of private bedrooms in shared households discussed by Heath and colleagues (Heath *et al.*, 2017), where they found that private bedrooms could guarantee the sharers’ privacy and thus can be useful for them to live at ease and reduce the possibility of tensions. Similarly, Yuanda (male, first year) discussed in his account about how the bed curtain helps avoid potential annoyance in his dorm:

We all have bed curtains ... Sometimes we have different schedules; some people want to sleep but others still have things to do and need to turn on the lamps. At this time, those who want to sleep can close their bed curtains to block out the light and then everyone can be freer to do what they want without disturbing each other.

(Yuanda, 23/04/2021)

In a study of shared room housing in Sydney, Nassreen and Ruming (2021) found various multisensory troubles encountered by their participants in room sharing, including privacy issues, disrupted sleep and constrained personal schedules. They argued that these experiences can negatively influence the emotional and relational bonds between sharers, reduce people’s attachment to the shared rooms and escalate the negotiations for people who want to be part of shared living schemes.

According to the accounts above and in Chapter 5, these sensory discomforts also exist in the dorm living of my participants and dealing with these issues is essential to their negotiation of roommate relationships. Playing an important role in this work, the bed curtain is thus beneficial to the development of the social aspect of these young people’s dorm living and their embodied well-being. More importantly, being able to keep a sense of privacy as desired and feeling freer to arrange personal time at night both reflect a sense of control over their own beds. As argued by Inness (1992), the significance of privacy is that it helps people control certain parts of their personal life rather than just separating them from others. Meanwhile, for Shaw (2015), the ability to create an environment with a comfortable level of darkness and light is the key to personal recreation and sleep in domestic space - he also

described this control of light as a kind of power. Aligning with these conclusions, the importance of the bed curtain to these participants is also further presented in its contribution to their mastery of their personal space.

The experience of dealing with unwanted light in dorms is also found in Mingyu's account, reflecting how he uses the bed curtain to keep out the light from his roommate's laptop screen at night in his current dorm, as this roommate always stays up late playing video games and thus disturbs him a lot. But according to Mingyu, he is not the only one who closes the bed curtain due to this light disturbance: "*all of us except for one [the one causing the light disturbance] have bed curtains, because he doesn't need to have one*" (Mingyu). Apart from his own bed, Mingyu also offered photos of his other two roommates' beds with the curtains. According to the photos and Mingyu's explanations, all three bed curtains are thick and have good closure: "*these [bed curtains] can't be opened, you just crawl under your curtain to get into your bed*" (Mingyu). These photos and Mingyu's narrative reflect the seriousness of the light disturbance in his dorm and the importance of the bed curtains for most of the participants. However, as discussed in Chapter 5, one difference between Mingyu and his current roommates is that he feels the atmosphere of the dorm is too chaotic to integrate into. The uncomfortable experience brought by the annoying roommate and undesirable dorm atmosphere together made Mingyu lose his sense of control and belonging to his dorm, echoing an argument of Brickell (2012) that an unsatisfactory living experience can give people a sense of homelessness although the residential site is still there. In a study by Burrell (2014), the formation of this emotion is also conceptualised as 'home *unmaking*'. This is a sensory process caused by the unease people can suffer from various sources, including what they see, hear, touch or feel related to the material or emotional aspects of their domestic living. For young people like Mingyu who is required to return to the dorm every day, creating personal retreats where he can temporarily reduce the sensory discomfort from the outside environment and then rebuild a sense of control is a feasible way to cope with his feeling of "*unmaking*". In this sense, Mingyu's bed curtain plays a role as a material "*at the threshold of the interior and exterior*" (Baxter and Brickell, 2014, p. 137) which helps form a boundary of his "*little world*" for more sensory comfort, although it continues the relational alienation between him and his roommates. Nevertheless, Baxter and Brickell also argue that the object at the gate point is thought to be crucial to both homemaking and *unmaking*.

Nasreen and Ruming (2021) suggest that domestic living is a dynamic process with ups and downs of homemaking and *unmaking* rather than a single form. As suggested in Chapter 5,

the relatively closed bed is also a way for Mingyu to prevent the tension between him and his roommate from escalating. Aligning with the above two arguments, the bed curtain in Mingyu's dorm living also plays a role in homemaking from another perspective, as it helps maintain the dormitory harmony. In this way, the bed curtains not only reveal but also play roles in dorm living and relationship negotiations and the sensory and emotional experiences they involve are multifaceted.



Photo 1: Mingyu's bed curtain

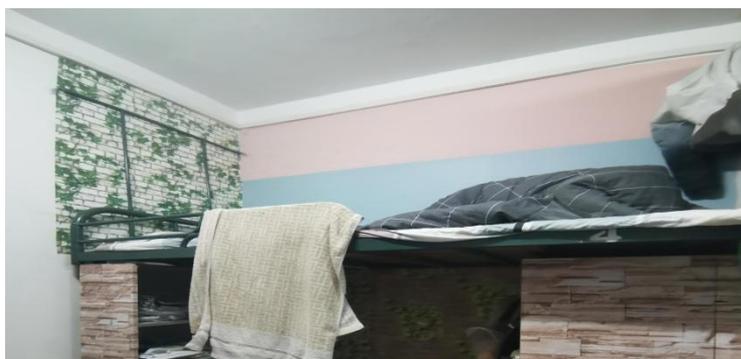


Photo 2: The bed of Mingyu's roommate, who always staying up late playing video games



Photo 3: Mingyu's other roommate's bed curtain



Photo 4: Mingyu's other roommate's bed curtain

Bed curtains to send social signals

A number of other participants also discussed how the use of bed curtains influences everyday interactions and roommate relationships through sending signals. Echoing Finn's (2015, p. 88) suggestion that a "locked door" on a private bedroom and staying in there for a long time in a shared household are usually signs of refusal to build group bonds with other sharers, the rejective signals delivered through frequently and tightly closed bed curtains can be seen in my research data. However, how this kind of signal affects these college roommates' emotions and relationships varies in different accounts. As mentioned earlier, this symbol of indifference in Mingyu's dorm is mainly expressed by himself and the social distance in the dorm actually makes him feel better. Therefore, he is satisfied with such a social signal and can also approve of and understand his roommates' behaviours of always closing their personal bed spaces: "It's quite good, because everyone can have a small space of his own" (Mingyu). However, in her interview, Jianning reflected on a more complex set of feelings involving the closed bed curtains in her dorm:

We all had bed curtains. They did help protect our privacy, but the closed bed curtains also caused a distance between us. The curtains were like walls, your roommates were shielded, and you were not sure what they were doing or whether they wanted to interact with you. So, we usually chatted less when the bed curtains were closed ... admittedly, the bed curtains were like barriers to the communications in my dorm in general. (Jianning, 04/06/2021)

Anthony and colleagues (Anthony, Campos-Castillo and Horne, 2017) argue that proper disclosure of oneself can demonstrate and promote intimacy and trust in the negotiation of personal relationships and it is also important to the development of group solidarity. On the contrary, maintaining too much privacy can hinder the progress of this kind of interpersonal proximity and trust or group bond and make some people feel left out or alienated. Jianning's

account contrasts with Mingyu's. Jianning and her roommates felt uncomfortable with such isolation and tried to make some adjustments to keep a balance between the social and the private aspects of shared living: *"sometimes we would not stay too long on the bed with the curtain closed, sometimes we would organise a short bedtime chat in which we could still talk with the curtain closed"* (Jianning). Their actions to maintain a degree of openness and interactions also demonstrated that they wanted to sustain a degree of closeness in dorm living. In this process, Jianning and the girl in the next bed particularly got closer quite quickly, as the position of their beds made it easier for them to adjust the use of their bed curtains: *"it was more convenient for us to chat; sometimes we could just roll part of the curtains up and sometimes we could directly go to each other's bed"* (Jianning). This side-by-side positioning of beds reveals what can be the positive effect of the material environment on the adjustments they made to the use of bed curtains, but this effect only works based on a desire to construct intimate ties. After balancing the cohesion and privacy, people in Jianning's dorm became more intimate and then were more willing to keep their personal beds open to each other.

According to Valentine and Hughes (2012), the formation of family closeness needs the interplay between spatial and relational practices. They argue that both physically being together and interacting with each other to cultivate intimacy are necessary for people to build family proximity. This is echoed in Jianning's narrative about the social relationships in the dormitory, as the practices around the bed curtains in her dorm helped construct a circle consisting of both relational and material closeness. The comparison between her and Mingyu's experiences also demonstrates that how bed curtains are used to maintain privacy and how this plays a role in emotional and relational exchanges in the dorm is associated with not only material conditions but also people's needs and attitudes towards relationship negotiation in their shared dorm living. Mingyu prefers not being violated in private space and emotions, thus he places more emphasis on protecting his *"little world"* and uses the bed curtain to stay away from the person and atmosphere he does not like. However, Jianning and her roommates tended to live as a group and actively created a sense of togetherness, thus the bed curtain for them was a tool to ease embarrassment at certain moments rather than isolate themselves from each other.

The data show that most participants' attitudes fell between those of Mingyu and Jianning. They do neither use the bed curtains to reduce interactions with roommates, nor do they get a sense of alienation from the closed bed curtains in the dorm. Based on most of their accounts, the bed curtains in their dorms are not often closed for too long and people would

not always stay on the bed either, for example: *"we close the curtain just when we are going to sleep. When we are not going to sleep, we usually don't stay on the bed but sit by the desk under the bed"* (Yuanda); *"when we don't sleep, we usually open the bed curtains and stay near our own desks"* (Yoyo). For these participants, the specific space around the desk is the main site of their everyday activities in the dorm, while the bed is just a place for sleep in most cases. In this sense, the meaning of the bed curtain for them tends to be instrumental value rather than emotional and relational rejection, which is like that in Jianning's dorm. However, Pei Han (female, graduate) mentioned that she and most of her roommates often closed the bed curtains, but this was accepted by all the members of her dorm: *"personal bed was the only place not shared in the dorm and keeping a private space is totally understandable for every one of us"*. Like Pei, Wei (male, third year) also spoke about understanding a roommate who always stays on the bed with the bed curtain closed: *"for him who often stays in the dorm, a private space may be very important and using the bed curtain is a good way to keep that. It's his personal choice, it's fine with me"*. Different from Jianning, they did not feel a sense of distance, even from the long-closed bed curtains. Although Yusheng mentioned a sense of *"suppression"* when she saw that everyone in her dorm often stayed on their personal bed with the curtain closed, this situation was defaulted to everyone and thus continued from the beginning to the end of their college years, due to the value of the bed curtain in guaranteeing the privacy in *"our own little worlds"* (Yusheng). For Yusheng, 'privacy' is very important in dorm living and she emphasised it frequently in her account.

Young and colleagues (Young, Lau and Ho, 2020) highlighted how the architectural design of nursing homes, particularly shared bedrooms, influences the residents' sense of privacy and their subsequent social behaviours. These researchers also suggest that the highly open living environment which makes the residents feel less privacy may make them withdraw from social interaction. According to the accounts of Pei and Wei, the highly shared environment of their university dorms may not necessarily cause social withdrawal, but such a structure can make residents living there reinforce the protection of their private space and time. More importantly, this perception of public-private boundaries and the relevant behaviours can be understood and respected by roommates in most cases. In Yusheng's experience, although the closed bed curtain brought a sense of segregation to her dorm atmosphere, the desire for privacy neutralised the separated feeling and made her and her roommates accept this way of using bed curtains. This fits with Young and colleagues' (Young, Lau and Ho, 2020) conclusions, illustrating how the architectural factor influences these young people's sensations of both the physical and social environment of their dorms.

On the other hand, this open structure also makes some participants feel less cut off from dorm communications, as the bed curtain can just hinder the light rather than sound: *“we can still hear each other’s voice, so we can still talk as usual when the bed curtain is closed and there is no impact on our relationship”* (Yingying, female, third year); *“we could just chat as we want even the curtain is closed, it doesn’t matter”* (Mei Hu, female, graduate); *“we won’t stop talking just because he closes the bed curtain”* (Wei); *“just talk whenever you want, if you really want to see each other’s face, just stick your head out of the curtain”* (Pei). As revealed in these accounts, the closed bed curtain would not obstruct these participants’ mundane interactions and relationship formation with their roommates. Moreover, different from Jianning, these participants do not reflect much need for face-to-face communications in their narratives of dorm interactions. Thus, they do not need to create special communication opportunities to address the relevant sense of isolation as Jianning and her roommates did. As argued by Ingold (2000), what a person hears and sees both belong to a unified sensation system which forms this person’s experiential actions on the things in an environment. Shedding light on this conclusion, these participants’ accounts demonstrate how the sounds can also make people in their dorms feel each other’s presence in some cases and thus talking without seeing can still maintain communications and build bonds for them.

Bed curtains to create a caring dorm

Nevertheless, the closed bed curtain does not just involve a potential or practical shield, alienation or even tension in roommate interactions. In some participants’ accounts, it can also directly convey a signal of kindness and care to roommates:

I can have my own private space when I close the bed curtain. Meanwhile, sometimes I like laying in the bed and watching my cell phone after the lights out and the light of my phone may disturb my roommates, but it can be prevented by my bed curtain. (Mo, female, third year, 08/04/2021)

Sometimes I would study on the bed at night. I was really afraid of disturbing them [his roommates], so I bought a bed curtain and closed it when I worked. (Lin, male, graduate, 06/02/2021)

Like many other participants, Mo (female, third year) and Lin also regard the personal bed as a private place for relaxation or study. However, they closed the bed curtain to avoid disturbing roommates, revealing a consideration of their roommates' sensory experience while meeting their personal needs. Their behaviour sheds light on the argument on Drazin's (2001) conclusion, suggesting that care, including a sense of responsibility, can be reflected not only in words but also in materials like domestic furniture. However, different from Drazin's discussion, focusing on the material quality of the furniture, Mo's and Lin's accounts demonstrate how their use of bed curtains makes this object signify their caring and responsible attitudes toward roommates. Meanwhile, as illustrated by Mause (2008, pp. 311 & 314), balancing "*self-interest*" and "*collective good*" is crucial to the warm and friendly environment of shared living. This balancing work is also presented in Mo's and Lin's motivation of using the bed curtain, which includes the comfortable living of both them and their roommates. But their narratives reflect a proactive avoidance of the potential disturbance of others rather than a passive defence against possible trouble from others, which is different from the participants mentioned earlier in this section and more evidently reveals their willingness to build warmth in the dorm. According to Sheng's (male, graduate) account, this behaviour was engaged in by his roommate and he clearly reflects how he felt the kindness of that roommate from the closed bed curtain and experienced the development of the dormitory intimacy: "*It was very kind of him to do so, he didn't bother but considered us. He is nice, I like what he did*". From the perspective of a receiver of such a considerate signal, Sheng's account reveals how the closed bed curtain can play a positive role in a pleasant, shared living state in the dorm based on promoting interpersonal concern and affection.

The above accounts in this subsection together display a multifaceted picture of how the bed curtains are used and play a role in these college roommates' negotiations of the space and social relationships in such an open living environment. In accordance with these data, the bed curtains can be used in various ways, frequently or seldom, all day long or at certain moments. They can involve not only social isolation or emphasis on privacy but also kindness and intimacy. Meanwhile, sometimes the same meaning they symbolise can cause different emotions and reactions in different dorms. As mentioned in Chapter 3, Miller (2005) refutes the dualism of objects and subjects but highlights their interplay. In Woodward's (2020) research, this theory is regarded as an approach of materiality study and she further emphasises the interrelations among various elements, including bodies, social relationships, objects and environment, suggesting the complex nature of things. The various roles played by the bed curtains in these young people's organisation of personal bunk/bed and their

roommate relationships echo these arguments, revealing how this object engages with the architectural environment of the dorm, these young people's multifarious relationships and their relevant sensory experience and perceptions.

According to some accounts, the bed curtain can not only be of instrumental use but also plays a role as a kind of decoration of the bed. Based on participants' accounts, personalised curation also makes up an essential part of the materiality of the personal bunk/loft-bed area in the dorm, which is discussed in the next section.

6.1.2 Individualised decorations and facilities

Curation of desk areas for personal needs and interests

As noted above, the personal bunk/bed areas are closely connected with private living experience. Personalising these spaces is important or even necessary to most participants' inhabitants. In their interviews and with their photographs, many participants showed how they decorated and furnished these spaces, particularly the desks, shelves and lockers. Many of them clearly reflected their interests or personal needs in the explanations of their curations. Chen offered some photos of the desk of his loft-bed in his college dorm at different periods and explained how:

Both the wallpaper and that on the desk were bought by me, they are beautiful and easy to clean ... the poster was added a bit earlier than the Chinese calligraphy, both are what I like ... the appliances and mirror were added to facilitate my study and grooming ...also the keyboard, I decorated it ... you can see that there are more books in the later photo ... I studied here and played there throughout these four years, it could meet all my needs in daily life ... (Chen, 18/01/2021)



Photo 5: Chen's personal desk (taken in the early years of college)

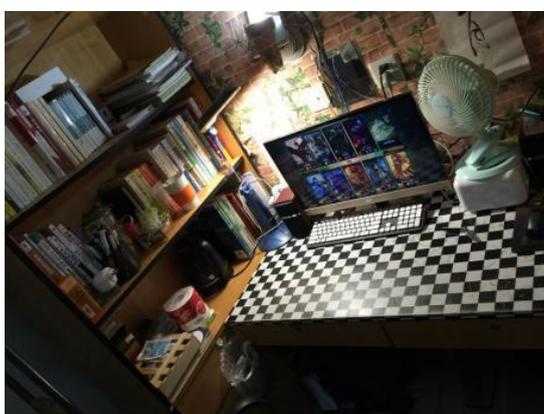


Photo 6: Chen's personal desk (taken near graduation)

In research by Fidzani and Read (2012), they argued that people can individualise their personal bedrooms based on their everyday mental, sensory or physical needs and this individualization can help forge a sense of belonging to this space. This was a theme that emerged in my data. For example, Chen's decoration and furnishing of his personal desk displays not just his material organisation of the space but also of his personal lifestyle, thoughts and HE life during his college years. Meanwhile, these reflections in Chen's account are not static due to the evolution of his life over these four years. Supporting Garvey's (2001) argument that decorating and then changing decorations can also be an updating process of self-identity, the increased number of books and stationery on Chen's shelf reflect his transition from a low-level to a high-level student in terms of identity and everyday life. Using different things ranging from a poster to Chinese calligraphy to decorate the wall and changing the appearance of the keyboard also demonstrates the evolution of his entertainment and personal styles and interest throughout college, aligning with Lincoln's (2014) conclusion that young people's lifestyles change constantly with the development of their identity and can then be reflected in their bedroom possessions. The continuous

personalised changes of Chen's possessions in his desk area also reflect his control over this space. He also remembers regularly cleaning the desk space, even years after graduation: "*I clean there every two weeks*" (Chen). In other words, this area was always closely connected with Chen and his individuality no matter how his life and styles developed, revealing his sense of belonging to this space. As Heath and colleagues (Heath *et al.*, 2017) suggest, people can get a sense of control and belonging over their private bedrooms in a shared household through individualised decorations. Reflecting this argument, Chen's account demonstrates how he forged strong ties with his personal loft-bed area in his dorm through personalised spatial shaping. However, like the participants who used bed curtains to avoid disturbing their roommates, Chen's control over his desk area was also influenced by the open residential environment and shared living, shown in the night light he installed on the wall to avoid annoying his roommates when he read at night. Wei also displays photos around his personal desk, which he "*carefully arranged*":

These little things [the objects in Photo 7, including an electric fan, electric clock, PC and laptop, pad and desk lamp] are all I added myself over these years. I clean my desk almost every day. I rarely see people around me who would like to keep personal space as clean and tidy as I do. (Wei, 14/04/2021)

Wei's narrative of his personal desk reflects a sense of pride which is also presented in his emotion map (see Map 6). He put an emoticon with sunglasses in his personal desk area to display a comfortable feeling about this space:

This is how I feel every night when I come back and sit here. Very enjoyable. Plus, it's a place within my reach and carefully arranged by me. These facilities, other things and the environment here all make me happy. Every night I would sit here and wind down the whole day. (Wei, 14/04/2021)

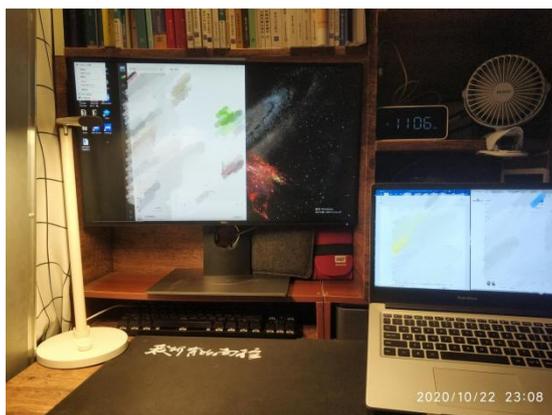
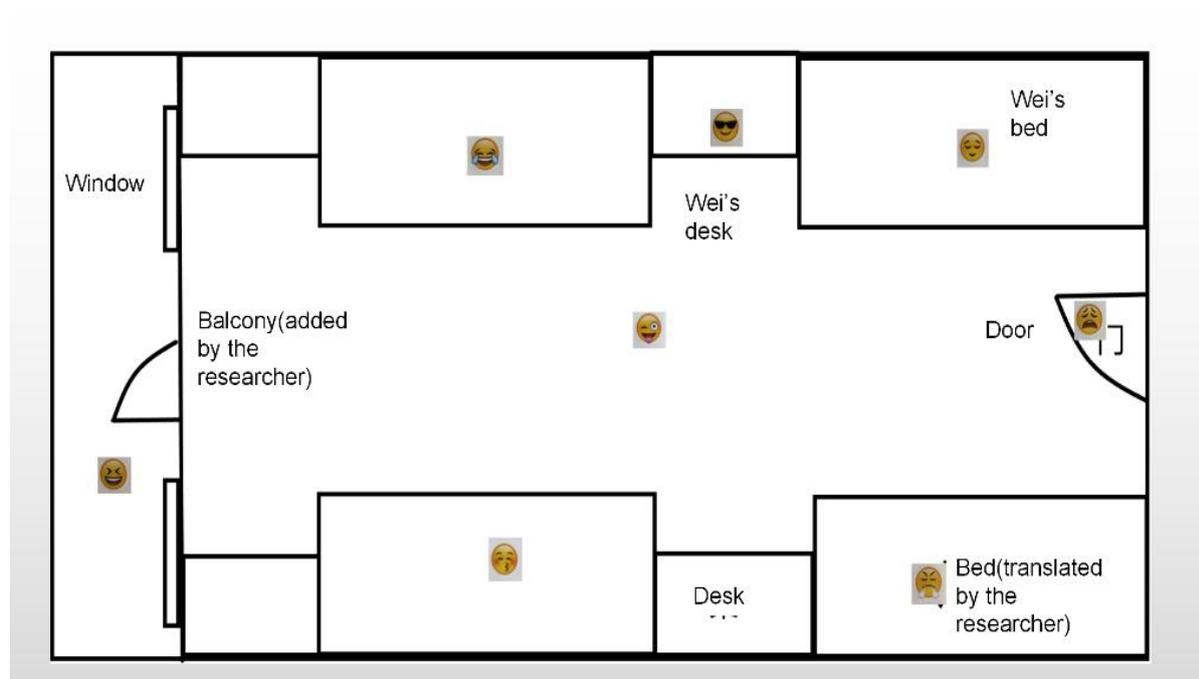


Photo 7: Wei's personal desk (he curated it carefully and clean it every day)



Map 6: Wei's dorm (he put an 'enjoyable' emoticon with sunglasses in his personal desk area)

Noble (2004) suggests that accumulating household objects can also be the accumulation of 'being', including not only selfhood but also the association with space and objects. Aligning with this argument, Wei's increasing number of items on his personal desk reflects his ongoing self-identity and the relevant needs from the first to the third year of college. The decorations and furnishings on his desk reveal his individuality, meet his needs and make him feel cheerful, thus connecting him to this space. However, compared with Chen's narrative, the incremental configurations, the more frequent cleaning and the daily experience of pride and affection in Wei's account all illustrate a more intense sense of spatial control and belonging to this space. His feeling of 'being' with this space displays not

only a sense of dependence based on satisfaction with its function, but more importantly an emotional attachment focusing on its affective value to him from a psychological point of view (Scannell and Gifford, 2010).

Apart from the self-made curations, there are also decorations left by previous residents in some accounts. For example, Zhen, a first-year male undergraduate, shared a photograph (see Photo 8) of his personal desk and discussed how he curated this space including dealing with the remnants there:

Originally there were some decorations left by previous students living here, but I don't like those things. So, I covered them and redecorated them here. What you are seeing now are all the things I like. The wallpaper looks nice and easy to clean. I like anime, so I have these posters here. Other stuff are also all selected based on my interests ... I stay here every day, this is my space, I have affection for it. (Zhen, 04/05/2021)



Photo 8: Zhen's personal loft-bed desk (self-curated decorations and items based on his interests)

Redecorating his desk on a large scale and making it an exhibition of personal interests reflects Zhen's strong sense of ownership and attachment to his personal desk. His emphasis on individuality and uniqueness is also seen in his comments related to his roommates: *"my roommates also have their decorations on their personal desk, but we would not be the same, due to different interests and tastes"*. It can be found that difference and personalization are key to Zhen's curation of his personal space. Curation of desk space often involves layering over the things like wallpaper left by previous students. While Zhen creates the desk space by replacing the older decorations of the previous desk owner, Wanyin does nothing to hide the left-over decorations:

The sticker, the wallpaper and those sticky hooks or something [not in the photo] are all the things left by previous students ... They look not that nice to me, but it's okay, they would not interfere with my use of the table and it takes time to make changes. So, I just keep them here. (Wanyin, 02/05/2021)



Photo 9: Wanyin's loft-bed desk (the cartoon stickers and the cyan wallpaper were both left by previous residents)

Although Wanyin does not like those remnants either, she keeps them rather than covering them like Zhen does. Her account reflects that she cares more about the function than the decoration of her personal desk. It can be found from the photo that her desk area is filled with various daily necessities and books, which she acknowledged: *"I store a lot of stuff here, sometimes it turns messy. Maybe I can find time to tidy it up, but I'm not good at it"* (Wanyin). Focusing on the storage of the personal desk area and using it efficiently, Wanyin has lower requirements for the appearance of this space, even its tidiness. In this sense, her maintaining of reservation of those remnants actually represents a neglect of them. As argued by Moran (2004), the objects of past occupants left in certain places can still be meaningful to the current occupants, even though there was no connection between the people and the things. In Lincoln's (2014) research on teenage bedrooms, this conclusion is supported by their finding that the current occupant can like and keep some of the decorative remnants of the bedroom's previous occupant. In Lincoln's (2014) study, participants added things to existing decorations, making personalised re-creations and reflecting a process of material continuity and an indirect biographical link between the previous and current occupants. In contrast, my data revealed the current occupants' rejection or indifference to the previous occupants in their personal desk area. Nevertheless, the mainly negative attitudes and strategies toward the left behind decorations were based on their personal needs or emotions, demonstrating an achievement of personalization in their personal space.

In this way, these leftovers still have material meaning for these participants to express their individuality, although they play a role as counterexamples.

Importance of objects for maintaining connections with childhood/school friends and families

Some participants also discussed how objects involving their past play roles in their individualised curation of the personal bed area. Ying Zhang, a male first-year undergraduate, highlights objects on his personal shelf which have special significance to him:

There is a Newton pendulum on the second level ... It's given to me by a high school friend. Whenever I see it, I can remember our happy time in high school. On the first level is a pair of glasses given to me by another high school friend. At that time, we attended a competition together, I couldn't find my glasses, so he bought them for me immediately. These glasses always remind me of this guy and this experience. There are also other objects, like this hammer and that water drop, all given by my previous friends. We are good friends but can't contact or meet in a short time because we are in different universities. So, here I keep some objects about them. (Ying, 18/04/2021)



Photo 10: Ying's personal desk area (with the objects given by his high school friends on the shelf)

Brooks (2002) also found that some students entering university maintain their previous friendships and engage in various strategies to keep these active. From the material perspective, Ying's decorations on his personal shelf also reflect a preservation of his existing friendships with high school friends. The concept of "symbolic objects" (Palmer, O'Kane and Owens, 2009, p. 51) means that the objects symbolising the home can help the first-year students achieve a sense of "continuity" of home in the university and thus make

them feel better during the transition period. For example, Ying spoke of his identity as a new student and his cultivation of a sense of continuity of old friendship in the new environment where he is separated from those friends through the ornaments on his shelf. The early years of college are usually categorised by researchers as the transition period in which young people gradually form a new self-identity as college students and a new network in the university, although they may need strong associations with people or places from previous environments to help them through the transition (e.g., Brooks, 2002; Palmer, O'Kane and Owens, 2009). These concepts may offer an explanation for Ying's personal decoration involving his old friends. However, Huan, a male third-year undergraduate, showed that the home connections can be desired by not only the new students but also the continuing students. Huan (male, third year) offered a photo of a teddy bear which he usually puts on his bunk and discussed his feeling about it:

I cuddle it when I sleep ... It's furry, quite comfortable to hold. My mom bought it for me when I was in high school. There are actually two bears, I took one to university and left the other at home. I can feel a connection with my parents from it. Every time when I'm homesick, I would have a look at it. (Huan, 16/04/2021)



Photo 11: Huan's teddy bear (the photo was taken in the past, one bear is taken to the university dorm, the other left at home)

This chimes with Gorman-Murray's (2008) suggestion that possessions can play important roles in materialising various interpersonal connections, including family bonds; Huan's account evidently reflects how his sense of belonging to home and family is captured by the teddy bear even though Huan has been studying and living in this university for more than two years and, as discussed in Chapter 5, mutual trust and interdependence has been built between Huan and his roommates. In their research, Chow and Mealey (2008) found college

students can form diversified cognition and emotion about their original homes and their dorms through a period of living in the university. Echoing this argument, Huan's account reflects that students' transition in university can vary and be non-linear. Through the transition, he holds a sense of belonging to both his original home and the university dorm. These two bonds involve different sorts of relationships and contexts, but the teddy bear on Huan's bed signifies their co-existence and interweaving. As argued by Fidzani and Read (2012), a person can form a sense of belonging based on more than one place and all these places can be of significance to this person's development of self-identity. Underpinned by this suggestion, Huan's teddy bear spoke to gradual emotional evolvement rather than a radical shift of his self-identity through his university and dorm living. He manages selfhood as a college student sharing the university residence hall with others, but this is not inconsistent with his reservation and reinforcement of the self-identity as a member of his original family.

In addition to high school friends and parents, the sense of continuity materialised by the personal decorations on the bed area can also involve previous roommates. As discussed in Chapter 5, Mingyu moved from another dorm to his current one several months before the interview, as required by his university. Mingyu narrated how he misses his previous roommates and how this emotion is presented in his decorations:

I used the same wallpaper [on the wardrobe] in my old dorm. I miss it very much and thus use the same one here ... I admire a guy [of the previous dorm] very much. He is independent-minded, and I want to be like him. So, I wrote these 4 words: "our role model" followed by his name to encourage myself. (Mingyu, 30/04/2021)

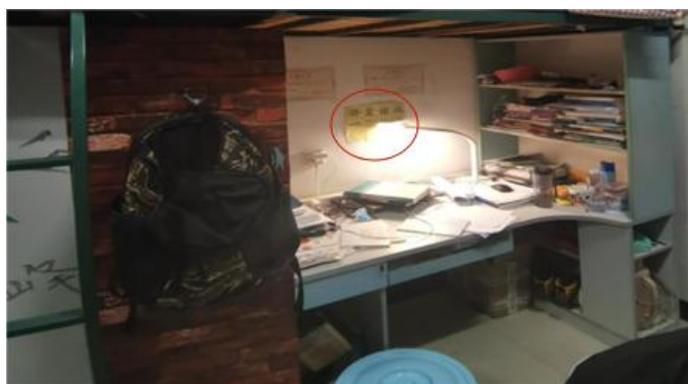


Photo 12: Mingyu's desk area (the wallpaper on the wardrobe and the Chinese words [circled by the researcher] refer to his previous dorm and roommates)

Marcus (1992) similarly found that people may tend to keep a sense of attachment to past environments and people which are significant to the evolution of their self-identity, through reproducing those environments and preserving keepsakes of those people. Chiming with this argument, Mingyu's decoration on his wardrobe reflects a kind of representation of his previous dorm and the words he wrote and stuck in prominent places reveals the continuity of his old roommate's influence on him, even though they had been separated. As discussed in the last chapter, Mingyu cannot integrate into the current dorm well and prefers the living and social relationships of the previous dorm. According to Young (2005), although certain things can be maintained over time, their meanings and the underpinned identity are not static due to unfixed social and material situations which may happen in the conservation process. In Mingyu's account of his current dorm living situation, these two possessions related to his previous dorm not only illustrate his reserved attachment to the place due to his involuntary leave, but they also materialise his different emotions about the two dorms, developed through his living in the current dorm: *"I cherish them [previous roommates] more after living in the new dorm and encountering various problems"* (Mingyu). These decorations also embody Mingyu's updated self-identification based on his affective difference, in which he forms a much stronger sense of belonging to the previous dorm and roommates than the current ones. Echoing Hecht's (2001) argument that people's possessions in the house can unite the past, present and future and thus reveal and shape their selfhood, the two objects linking Mingyu's living experiences in the past and present may also engage with his future: *"I will apply for dorm change next semester... It would be great if I can move to another dorm with my previous roommates. It may be difficult to achieve, but I want to try"*. Therefore, the bond between Mingyu and his previous dorm and the isolation he feels in his current dorm are signified and consolidated by these two objects, shaping his self-identity which then supports his plan to live with previous roommates again.

Personal curation and togetherness formation

Mingyu's personalised decoration on his desk area involves the dorm living and roommates not only from the past but also in the present. Similar reflections of the current roommate relationships are also seen in some other accounts but displaying shared identity and closeness. Yuanda explained how his personalised curation of his desk area partly benefits from his roommate's ideas:

Look at the boards on the wall. At the beginning, I found there isn't enough space on the desk to put my belongings...others found the same problem. Then, someone said the idea of using the space on the wall. We all felt it was good and did so... we each

curate our own space as we want, but sometimes we would see each other's nice work or chat about it and get some good ideas. (Yuanda, 23/04/2021)



Photo 13: Yuanda's personal desk (the idea of installing a new shelf came from the discussion with his roommates)

As Heath and colleagues (Heath *et al.*, 2017) noted, decorating a personal bedroom in a shared household is usually thought to be a private and individualised work without other sharers' knowledge or involvement. However, in Chinese university dormitories in which the structure is usually more open, decorating and furnishing the personal space are more likely to be collectively shaped. In Yuanda's story, he and his roommates curate their personal spaces based on their own taste, but they can learn from each other and share ideas, forming a special type of public involvement in such a personal material practice. Underpinned by the conclusion of Holton and Riley (2016) that students' personal possessions in shared university accommodations can express and shape both individuality and shared identity with their cohabitants, the personal belongings added by Yuanda and his roommates based on the common problems they encounter in this communal living environment reveal their collective identity as college roommates; their discussions and mutual influence on personal curations illustrate how this shared identity is developed in their everyday interactions through these personal objects. How the personalised curations are associated with roommate interactions and relationships are also mentioned by Wanyin, discussing how her personalised bed curtain anchors humorous interactions in her dorm:

My bed curtain is Disney Princess-themed, and I often say to them [Wanyin's roommates] like "the princess will go to sleep" when I'm going to sleep, it's very interesting. Then they all begin to imitate me before sleeping, hahaha ... we always joke with each other in this way. (Wanyin, 02/05/2021)

Like Wanyin, some participants also regard their bed curtains as a kind of decoration, displaying their aesthetic styles. For example, one of the reasons Mingyu chose his bed

curtain was *“it looks nice”*. Nevertheless, Wanyin's bed curtain is enjoyed not only by herself but also by her roommates. As discussed above, the bed curtain separates Wanyin's bed from the outside space. But as an object which can be seen by others every day, its special appearance adds an interesting communal topic for her and her roommates. This echoes Holton and Riley's (2016) argument that the shared subjectivities embodied by personal belongings in a communal residence need to be supported by certain contexts, Wanyin's narrative reflects the importance of the physical and social context to the meaning of her bed curtain. Supported by the open dorm environment and the humorous form of interaction between Wanyin and her roommates, her bed curtain is not just a materialised public-private boundary but can also be a source of shared fun in dorm living.

The positive emotion related to roommates is also seen in Mo's account of the decorations on her personal desk. She offered the photos of both of her and her roommate's personal desks and then revealed how their friendship was reified through the personalised decorations:

We both like artistic things, so yes, our decorations are a bit similar in style. But I think her decoration is more exquisite ... There is a picture of cherry blossoms and tulips on the left side of my desk. It's a postcard she gave me as a birthday gift. What she wrote on the back of it encouraged me a lot at that time when I was a bit worried about my future. This picture represents a trip we had together in a park where there were also cherry blossoms and tulips. This postcard improves our friendship, it's significant. (Mo, 08/04/2021)



Photo 14: Mo's personal desk (similar to her roommate's [photo 15] in decoration, due to the similar interests. The picture of cherry blossom on the left is a birthday gift given by that roommate and also reflects their collective memory of a trip)

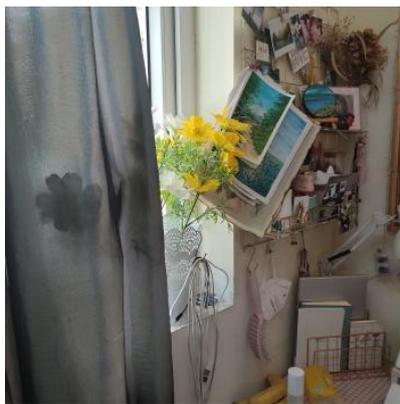


Photo 15: Mo's roommate's personal desk

As Gorman-Murry (2007) argues, how people affirm and manipulate their sexual identity and relationships can be embedded in their domestic space, through their arrangement of personal belongings, particularly significant ones. The same rationale is also demonstrated by Mo's account about personalised desk decorations, but from the perspective of friendship in the university dorm. The similarity of decoration style and Mo's affection for her roommate's work present a sense of proximity in terms of both individuality and emotion. Aligning with Fowler's (2004) suggestion that a gift is a special personal possession which is inseparable from the relationship between the giver and receiver, Mo treasures the postcard given by her roommate and uses it to decorate her personal desk, reflecting the importance that she attaches to their friendship. According to Mo's account, this postcard means not just a birthday wish but also her roommate's encouragement and company, which promotes their closeness and thus constitutes its importance to her. This also materialises the significance of gift giving practice to dorm closeness, as discussed in the last chapter. On these bases, incorporating the affective bond with roommates into the individualised decoration of personal space illustrates an affirmation of that roommate and the friendship in the evolution of Mo's self-identity.

In this way, the decorations on personal desks and/or the surrounding facilities like shelves and wardrobes play a significant role in participants' curation of their personal retreats and the homemaking or attachment establishment experiences in these places. These personal desks can be spaces for individuality expression, where these young people can form senses of control and home in their personal retreats. However, the personal desks can also be of importance in bonding these students and their roommates through their decoration practices. These social significance of spatial decoration are also reflected in the experiences of decorating bed curtains in a few cases.

In general, the above discussions reflect how the organisation of the personal bunk/loft bed area signifies and influences these young people's individuality, self-identity and roommate relationships. However, according to some participants' accounts, this personal area may not be the only space connected to their solitude and individuality. These sensory and emotional experiences can also happen on the balconies of their dorms, as discussed below.

6.2 Balconies: Extending Personal Retreats/Shared Spaces

This section focuses on the dorm balcony and how they are linked to roommate relationship negotiations. As part of the public space in the dorm, the balcony should be communal in principle. However, some interviews reflect that this place can also be used by some participants for personal retreat, like personal bunk/loft-bed areas. In other accounts, the balcony is a shared space where these college roommates can have practices like having fun together to form or develop intimacy. This shows the different roles played by the dorm balcony in these young people's relational and emotional negotiations in dorm living can be multifaceted and non-linear.

Balconies as an additional space of personal retreat

As some participants revealed, they can create and curate personal retreats not only around personal bed areas, but also in the balconies attached to their dorms. For instance, Mingyu stressed the balcony as another "little world" alongside his personal loft-bed area. As noted earlier, Mingyu has lived in two dorms with two different roommate groups, due to the development of their courses. He liked the balconies of both the previous and current dorm, particularly in his first dorm:

I always stay on the balcony, just like my bed and desk. I feel very free in these spaces ... I very much liked the balcony in my first dorm, I often leaned on the concrete fence with my arms on the small platform at the top. Then I looked down at the scenery outside, it was wonderful ... they [Mingyu's previous roommates] often slept early but sometimes I didn't want to go to bed that early, but I wouldn't disturb them, I just sat on the balcony, it always made me relaxed. (Mingyu, 30/04/2021)

Mingyu offered detailed narratives about his personal activities and positive sensory experiences on the first balcony, which reflects his affection for this space and the important role played by this balcony in his comfortable dorm living and well-being. In addition, Mingyu

uses the balcony to avoid disturbing his roommates at night, which reveals a sense of responsibility and caring for them. Similar considerations are also present in accounts about talking on the phone (like Bing, female, first year) and watching English learning videos (like Yongming) on the balcony, revealing the balcony as a place to both prevent causing a disturbance and performing personal activities in such a highly communal dorm space. In his current dorm, Mingyu still often stays on the balcony and he shows his affection for this space on his emotion map (see Map 2), with the same emoticon he put on his personal bed: *"My bed is my 'little world', so is this space [balcony], I also feel very happy about the balcony"*. According to Mingyu's narrative, his roommates seldom use the balcony, thus this space has become almost his personal space. He would stay on the balcony for a while every day, especially in the evening: *"My dorm is too noisy, so I like sitting here to enjoy the wind, I'm comfortable and relaxed here"*. For this personal relaxation, he bought a chair and put it on the balcony (see photo 16).

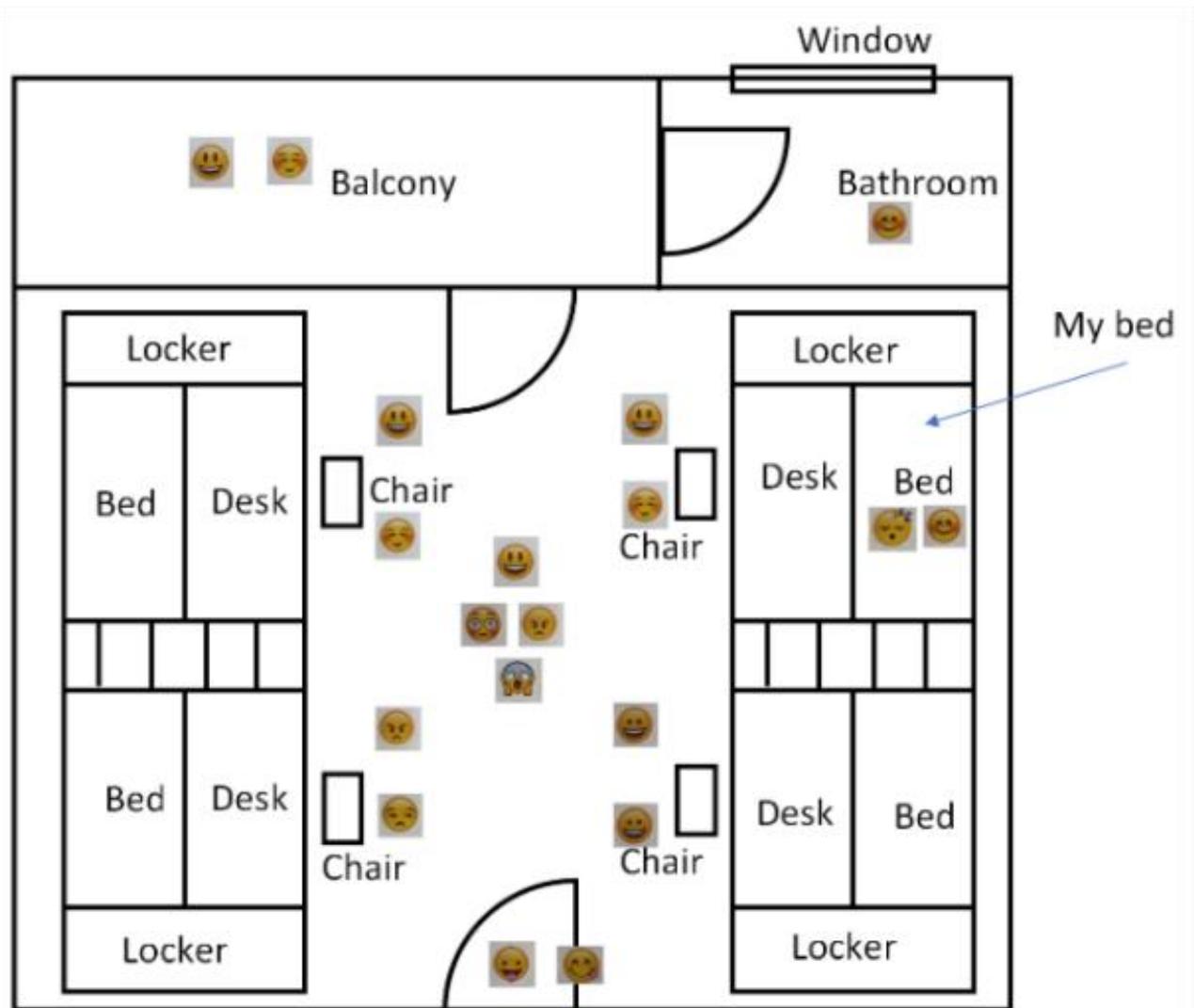
Mingyu's creation and personalised curation of the balcony illustrate his emotional attachment to this space where he can retreat from the dorm. Nevertheless, he retreats on the current balcony not just to relax himself but also to escape from the noisy dorm, unlike the situation in his previous dorm. Therefore, Mingyu's attachment to the current balcony is partly associated with the dorm tension he is facing. In this sense, the current balcony works as a space to help Mingyu keep a distance from his roommates and a dorm atmosphere he cannot integrate into, discussed in Chapter 5 as an approach to manage dorm tensions. As noted by Aronis (2022), a balcony is a special domestic space with flexible and non-static functions - it can open the wider outside world to people, transit them to freedom or help blur the sense of duty within their social connections. Otrishchenko (2019, p. 69) also noted that balconies can work as both *"thresholds"* and *"transitions"* between the domestic and outside worlds. Echoing these arguments, Mingyu's experiences of the two balconies reflect the variety and dynamic of this space's sensory and social significance to his negotiations of shared living and roommate relationships in different dorms. Moreover, in such a residence where time outside is restricted every day, students like Mingyu can connect themselves to the outside environment on the balcony, particularly at night, because this is a place where people can feel both within and outside of the residential space (Otrishchenko, 2019).



Photo 16: The balcony of Mingyu's current dorm and his chair

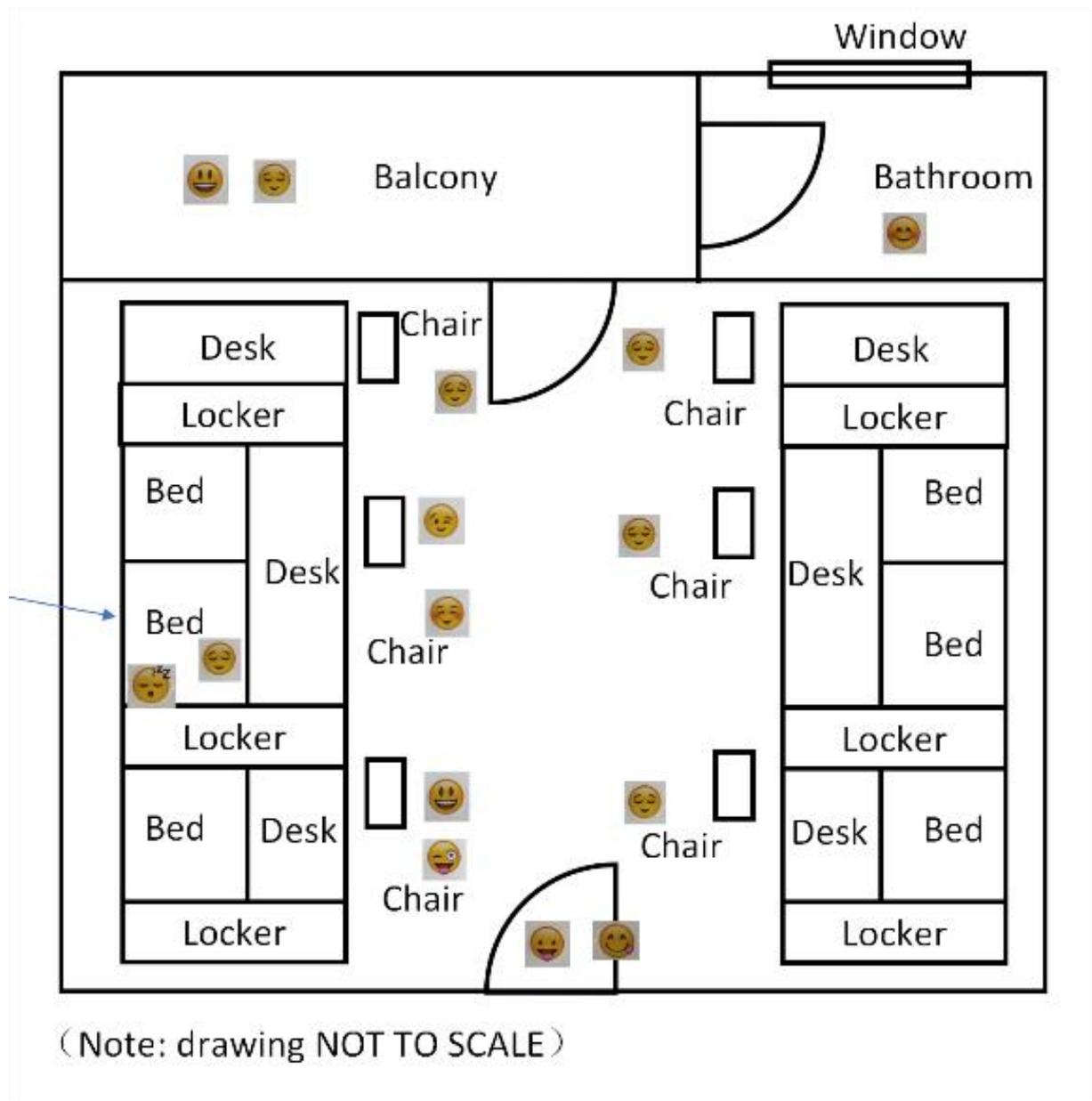
The function of linking to the outside was also mentioned by other participants, focusing on the sensory comfort they can enjoy on the balcony. For example, Feng described how he enjoyed his leisure time alone on the balcony in detail, with highly similar groups of emoticons used on the position of balcony on the emotion maps of all three dorms (see Maps 7-9) he lived in during his college years:

On weekends or when I was not very busy, I would take a shower in the bathroom and then stand on the balcony. I was always refreshed when I saw the scenery far away and the sun shone on the balcony ... I was reassigned to different dorms twice, but I felt the same about this space [balcony] no matter where I lived ... The only different emoticon on the second map is because there were more roommates in this dorm and thus there were relatively fewer chances for me to stay on the balcony alone; I was a bit disappointed. (Feng, 30/01/2021)

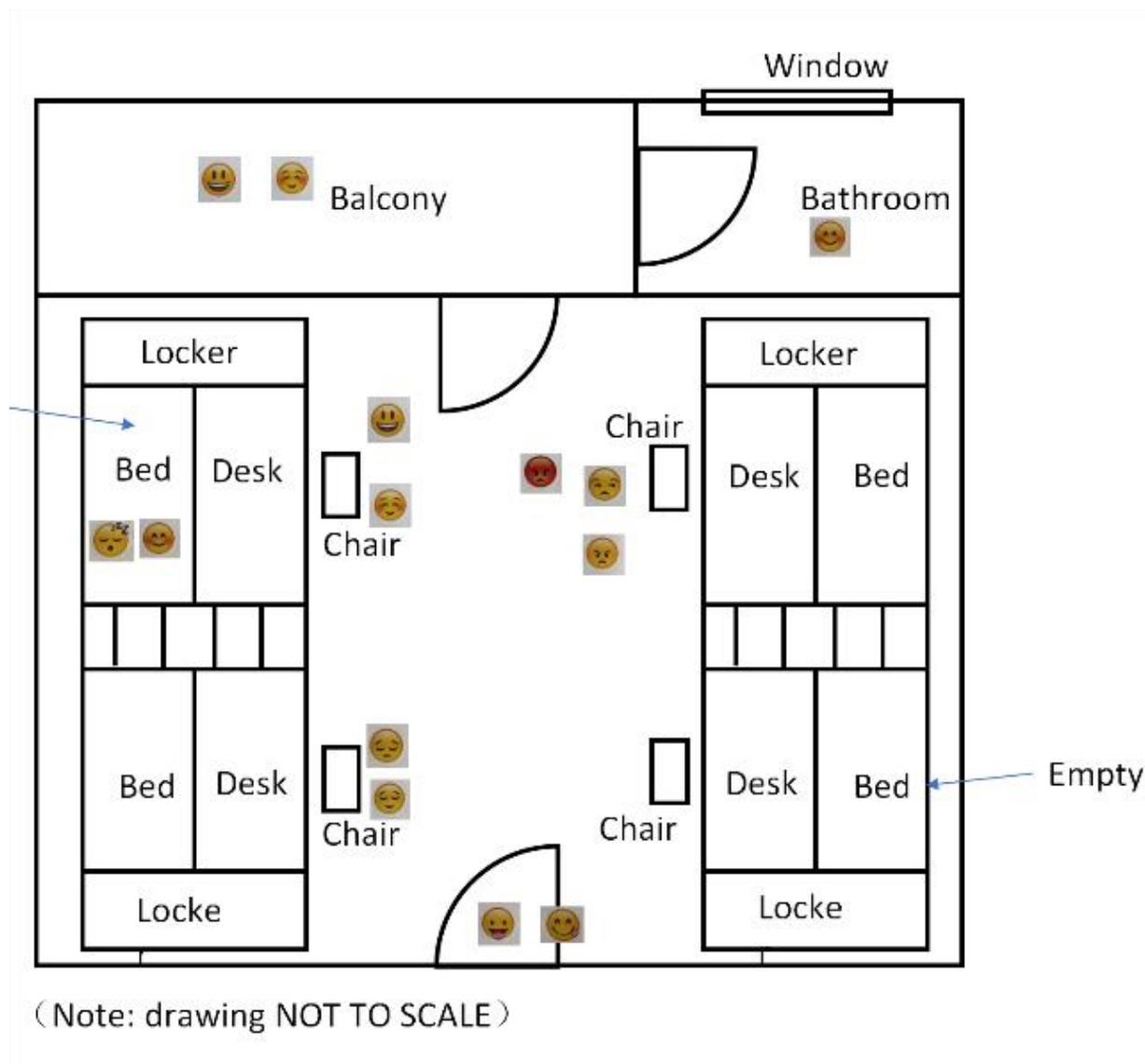


(Note: drawing NOT TO SCALE)

Map 7: Feng's first dorm (with different types of emoticons in the central space)



Map 8: Feng's second dorm (the right emoticon on the balcony is slightly different from those in other two maps, showing a bit disappointment)



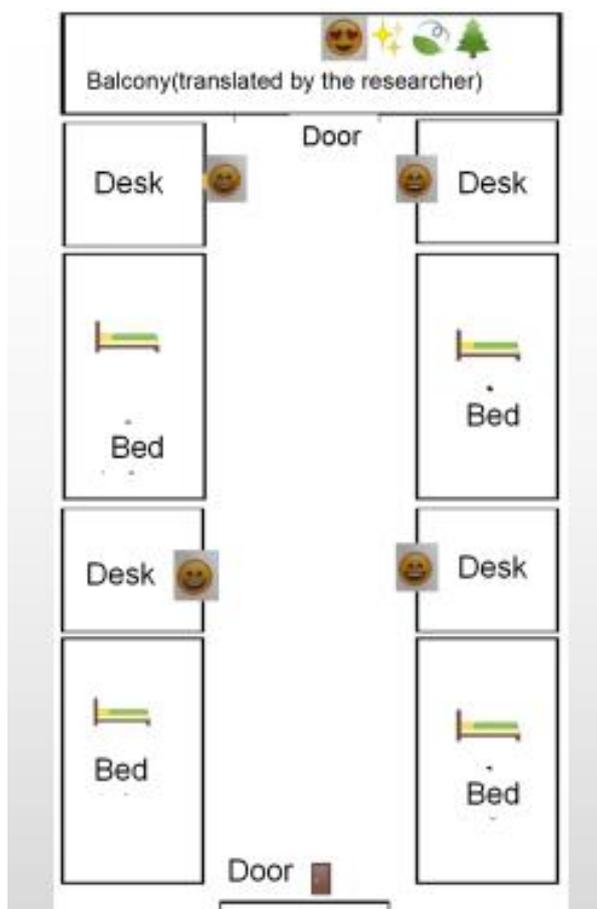
Map 9: Feng's third dorm

According to Feng's account, his attachment to the dorm balcony was based on his solitude in this space. Although he experienced different relational and emotional negotiations in the three dorms, he maintained affection for the dorm balcony, underpinned by his needs for personal well-being. By retreating from the communal environment and social negotiations on the balcony, Feng also made a balance between personal lifestyles and collective living; from both he could gain a sense of home and belonging to the dorm living. However, his comments also showed that this balancing work may be unstable, as the balcony is also a communal space in principle, thus the alone time was not always guaranteed. Likewise, participants like Mo described the balcony as "a place of healing" and showed this emotion on her emotion map with not only an emoticon representing "comfort" but also a range of images displaying her experiences on the balcony: "I often come here [balcony] to see these plants when my eyes are tired - I have shown them in the photo [Photo 17]. It's so healing."

Sometimes I also see the stars here at night... I feel so good to see the nature, it's so comfortable... This is a place that I personally like." (Mo).



Photo 17: The balcony of Mo's dorm and the surrounding scenery



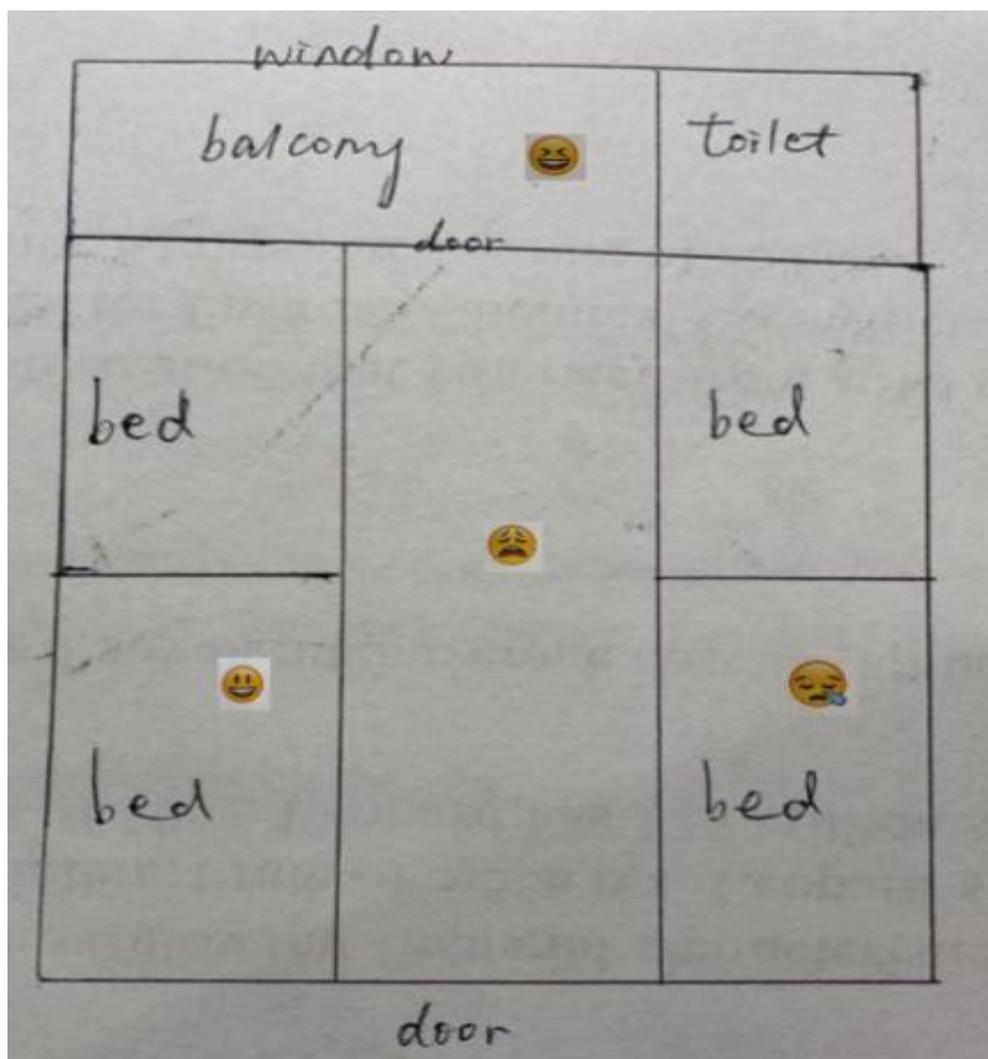
Map 10: Mo's dorm (the balcony is a 'healing' place for her)

Mo's account also reflects her personal needs and affections for the balcony. Like Feng's balcony experience and that narrated by Mingyu in his account of his first dorm, Mo's narrative also reveals that retreating from the collective and building intimacy with roommates are key to a comfortable and cohesive shared dorm living; there can also be a compatibility between these two kinds of practices in these young people's everyday negotiations. She also showed these on her emotion maps, on which she not only used emoticons to display her attachment to the balcony, but also put four 'happy' emoticons near the four desks to manifest the solidarity and intimacy among all the four people in her dorm.

In general, the above subsection reflects the significance of balconies for some participants in adding space to their personal retreats. However, as a public space in principle, balconies also offered additional space for some participants to build togetherness with their roommates, as examined in the next subsection.

Balconies as extended spaces for togetherness

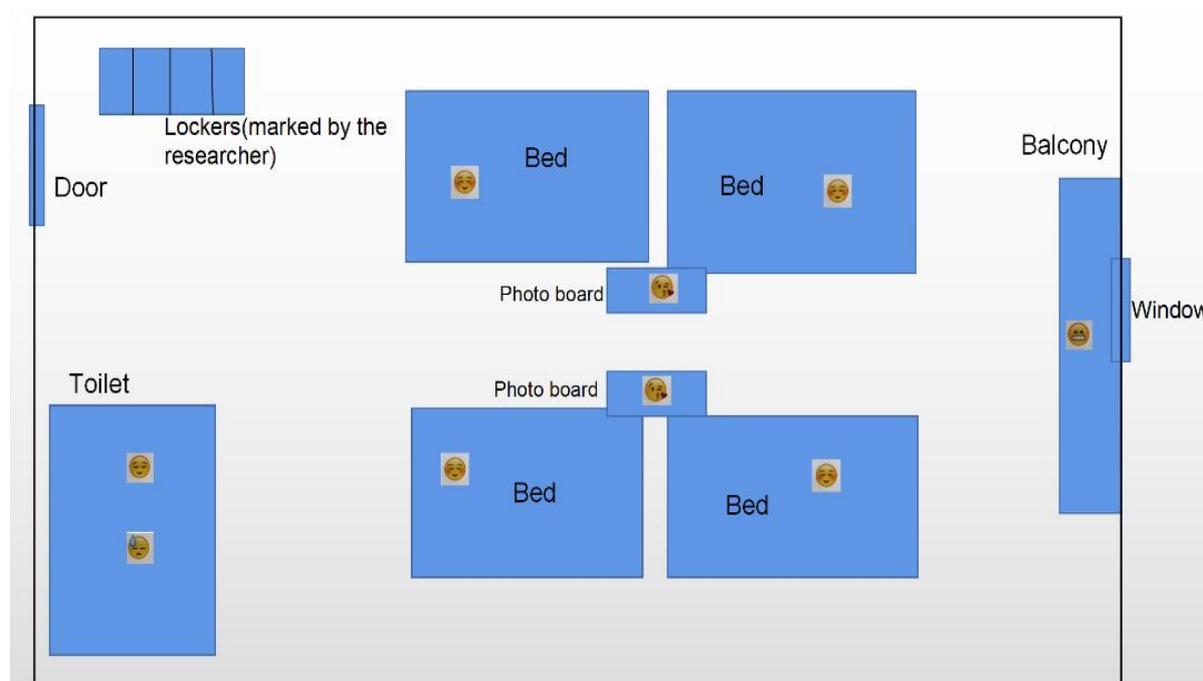
As an extension of the communal dorm space, the balcony is also collectively used by some participants and their roommates to dry clothes and store items. According to some accounts, the balcony can also be a space for the establishment of dorm intimacy. For example, Yang mentioned the balcony as a place where she and the roommate she got along best with have fun together, with a 'hearty laugh' emoticon on the emotion map: *"I want to choose an emoticon expressing the happiest feeling... [then she selected the one on the map] ... I often drank and chatted with her [that roommate] on the balcony; it was extremely happy."* (Yang, female, graduate). Sharing leisure time with the most intimate roommate on the balcony and showing the most positive emotion for this space reflects the importance of the balcony in Yang's friendship negotiations with certain roommates in her dorm living.



Map 11: Yang's dorm

According to other accounts, the balcony can also be of significance to the intimacy of the whole roommate group. For instance, Yingying linked the balcony to her drink sharing with roommates, with an “pride” emoticon on the emotion map:

I collected many cartons from a university activity. Meanwhile, I'm a part-time makeup blogger and thus can also receive makeup from many brand owners every day. Therefore, I accumulated a lot of cartons at the end of last semester. I sold the cartons and used the money to buy milk tea for my roommates ... This is quite interesting, I feel that I made a different contribution to my dorm; I'm a bit proud of myself. (Yingying, 03/05/2021)



Map 12: Yingying's dorm

In Yingying's narrative, the balcony is used by her to store cartons, but the practices of storing and selling these cartons to buy milk tea for roommates indirectly connected this space to caring and food sharing practices and the intimacy generated from these experiences. Yingying's pride and sense of contribution also reflect her sense of belonging to the roommate group formed through these actions. In this way, the balcony in Yingying's dorm indirectly promoted her togetherness with roommates. On the other hand, her practices to negotiate roommate relationships also give the balcony a social significance alongside its original function as a storage site. These constructed Yingying's emotional ties with this balcony. Similarly, Wei also narrated the collective discussions about the balcony redesign he organised:

I wanted to build a space on the balcony where we can chat about everything like our life and dreams while drinking and enjoying the night wind ... I planned to construct a mini bar with some lights, shelves and chairs ... I told them [Wei's roommates] and they were all excited and told me their ideas ... (Wei, 14/04/2021)

According to Wei, this collective plan was finally concerned and stopped by the dorm administrator, due to safety reasons. However, Wei still highlighted the excited feelings both

he and his roommates had when they redesigned the balcony together, which is also shown on the position of the balcony on his emotion map (see Map 6). As reflected by Wei's narrative, how the materiality of the balcony is associated with the relationship negotiations in dorm living can be embodied not only in the achieved roommate practices, but also in collective plans and expectations about its decoration.

Thus, with the potentials of both extending personal retreats and shaping roommate cohesion, the interplay between balconies and these young people's relational and emotional negotiations can be multifaceted. Compared with the balcony, other public spaces in the dorm involve more issues about communality in these young people's shared dorm living. How these college roommates share these public areas and negotiate the communality is discussed in the next section.

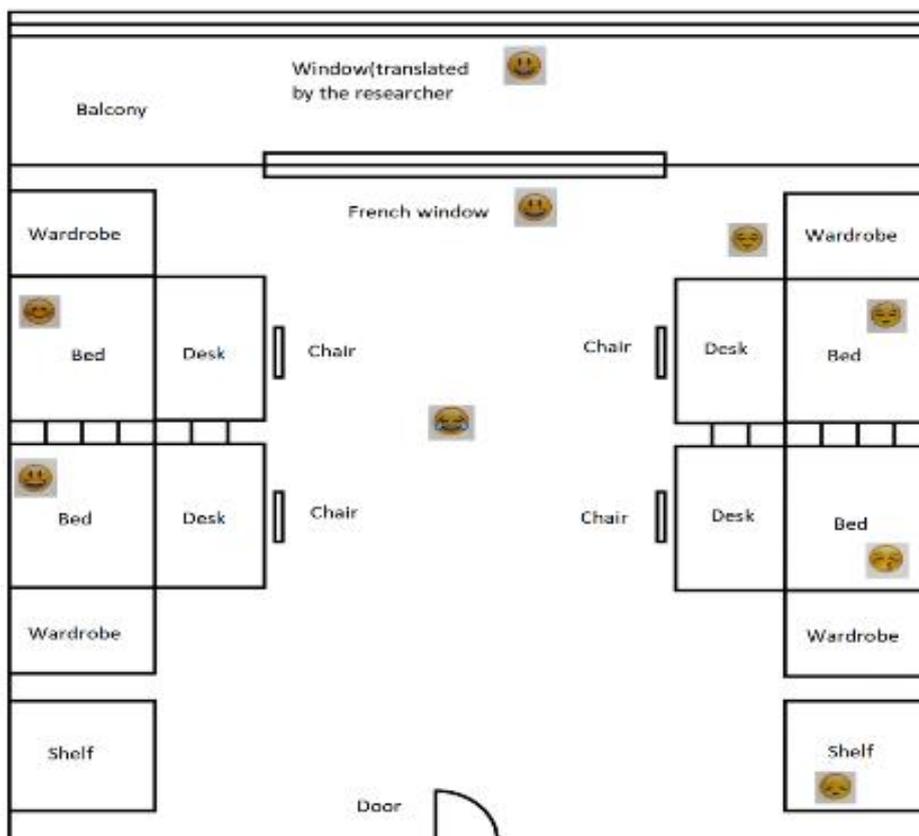
6.3 Public Spaces and Managing Spatial Communality

This section reflects on how some participants and their roommates manage and use the public areas of their dorms together in everyday interactions and relationship negotiations. This section also focuses on how the boundaries they set up between the public and private spaces are associated with their social relationships. The facilities of the inner bathrooms in some dorms also played roles in some participants' relational and emotional experiences in dorm living, which is also examined in this section. A few participants also mentioned how some special public spaces like the independent study room affect the tension management in their dorms, which is also discussed here.

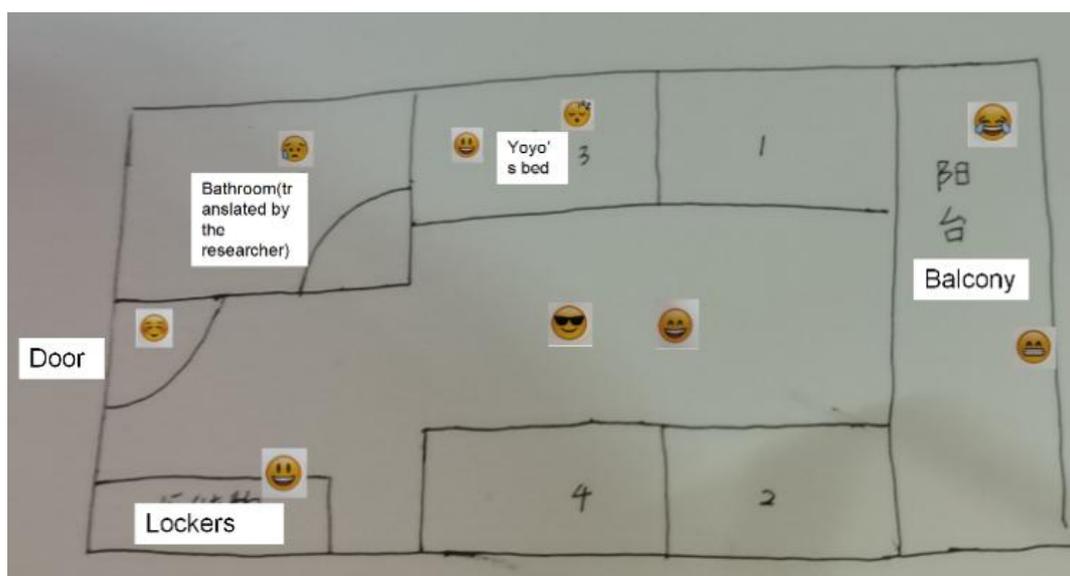
Public spaces and multifaceted relationship experiences

As discussed in Chapter 5, there are a range of collective activities conducted by participants and their roommates in dorms to form and develop togetherness. According to the interviews, the public central area is always the main site of these shared experiences. For example, the hot-pot parties organised by Anli and her roommates, the dorm dinner at New Year's Eve and card-playing time in Wei's account and the shared aerobics time mentioned by Yoyo, all take place in the central space of the dorm. In the interviews, these participants narrated the positive relational and emotional experiences they gained from these shared activities, like *"it [the central space] must be the happiest place, a lot of happy*

memories" (Anli, female, graduate) and *"live it up together"* (Yoyo). They also showed these feeling on their emotion maps:



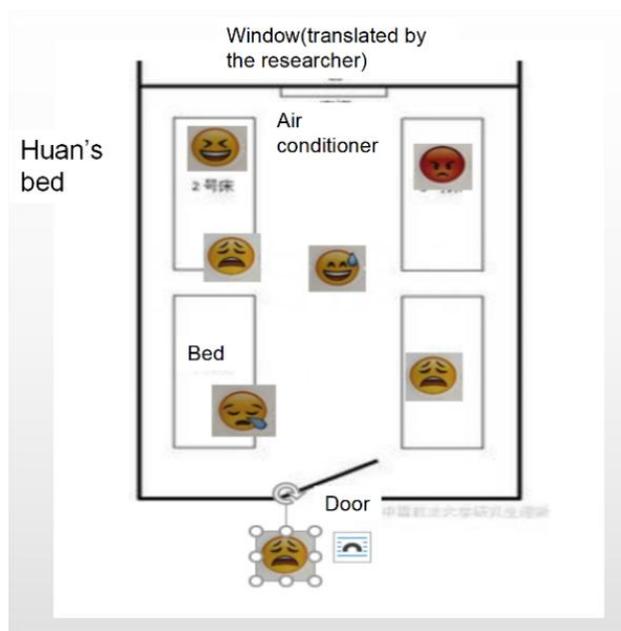
Map 13: Anli's dorm (emoticon in the central area reflects the hot-pot party hosted there)



Map 14: Yoyo's dorm (emoticons in the central area reflects her positive feelings about the collective events in her dorm)

On these maps, including Wei's emotion map I displayed above (see Map 6), the emoticons in the central area of the dorm all indicate the shared routines or rituals which helped promote roommate proximity in dorm living. In some interviews, this place is connected to more types of emotions, including negative ones. For instance, Feng put different kinds of emoticons on his map to show both his *"shock and anger"* about a severe conflict between two of his roommates and *"memories about the happy time spent with roommates"* (See Map 7). The variety of emoticons Feng showed in the central space on the map reveals a kind of ambivalence to this area, due to the various interactions he experienced there.

As reflected by participants like Feng, Yoyo, Anli and Wei, the central space of the dorm often works as the core site of general roommate interactions, especially practices shared by the whole roommate group. Thus, some participants also connected this space to the roommate relationships of their dorms in general. For instance, Wei used the emoticon of 'sticking tongue out' to show his overall feelings about his roommates (see Map 6): *"I love the happy memories with them in this space [central area], but I also have other feelings about them apart from happiness. There is a mix of different feelings, a bit ambivalent... I think it is 'love but also hate'"*. Similar complex emotions are also presented in Huan's emotion map, with an emoticon of 'smiling but sweating' to summarise his feelings about his roommates in general: *"We have a sense of togetherness, but maybe not that intimate, not 100% intimate"*.



Map 15: Huan's dorm

Like Wei, Huan derived both positive and negative experiences from the negotiations of roommate relationships in his dorm living, based on which he generated a sense of ambivalence towards his roommates. In the middle of their emotion maps, both of them embodied such ambivalent overall emotions with emoticons they thought expressed multilayered feelings. The above cases demonstrate how these young people gain emotional experiences in the central area of their dorms due to a variety of daily interactions or relationship practices. Apart from the above dorm practices, decorating public spaces together and its significance to dorm solidarity was also highlighted by some participants, as discussed below.

Collective decoration of public spaces and reinforcing cohesion

Some of the participants also spoke about or shared photographs of how they formed emotional links to this space through their decoration of it with their roommates. For example, Yingying narrated her experience of working with roommates to decorate the central area of the dorm with both photographs and her emotion map (see Map 12):



Photo 18: The central area of Yingying's dorm (decorated by Yingying and her roommates)

We strung and hung these small light bulbs; we also made these photo boards with our collective photos ... The SpongeBob cushion is mine; the potted plants are gifts we got in an activity. Other decorations like the curtain and bulbs were bought by us together, we went Dutch on them ... It is warm and significant to do these things ... I like these photo boards very much, because we have many photos taken together, they represent and are full of our nice memories, I'm always very happy when I see

these photos. That's why I used the emoticon of "kiss" on the map, just to show full of happiness and intimacy. (Yingying, 03/05/2021)

In her account, Yingying displayed her collaborations with roommates throughout the whole process of dorm decoration, from getting the ornaments to arranging them in the public central space of the dorm. As noted by Chevalier (2002), decorating the communal residential space, particularly the objects used in this process, can help embody the sharers' sense of household. Echoing this argument, the sense of togetherness reflected in Yingying's dorm decorating process and the warmth she gained from it reveal the dorm intimacy and cohesion shaped by this spatial practice and the materials they applied. These relational and emotional embodiments are especially demonstrated by Yingying's emphasis on the photo boards in words and images. As suggested by Rose (2003), family photos can help build domestic ties between people looking at photos and their family members in them through memories and imagination, beyond the limits of time and space. Similarly, in Yingying's account, the group photos on the photo boards always stimulate her memories with roommates and the relevant positive emotions, which have become a mark of their intimacy and a sense of group belonging.

The collective dorm decoration and how it shaped roommate bonds also came up in Wei's interview, on his emotion map (see Map 6) and in the photographs he shared of the decorations. Standing out in Photo 18 are strings of light bulbs, which are the key dorm decoration enacted by Wei and his roommates for a comfortable living atmosphere:

We often light open the bulbs in the afternoon and evening to build a better atmosphere. The light of the fluorescent lamp on the ceiling tends to have a cool tone, but we prefer the warm light of these bulbs, it makes our dorm cosier. (Wei, 14/04/2021)



Photo 19: Wei's dorm (mainly decorated by small light bulbs)



Photo 20: 'The Nicest Dormitory' label on the door of Wei's dorm (Wei and his roommates won this honour together in the Dormitory Cultural Festival of their department)

According to Wei, the idea of decorating the dorm together emerged when he and one of his roommates first met: *"When we first entered this dorm, I hit it off with him because we both thought that we should arrange this place well, as we will live here for the next four years"*. For Reimer and Leslie (2004), the communal practices of homemaking in household sharing, like the consumption and arrangement of the home's appearance, is closely linked to the formations and negotiations of the collective identity among sharers. Similarly, the decoration practice shared by Wei and his roommates, based on their consensus at the beginning of the shared living period, also reflects the development of their collective identity and communal aspirations to construct a sense of home in the dorm space. Their sense of group belonging was further strengthened by gaining the collective honour of 'The Nicest Dormitory', which Wei thought *"mainly owed to these bulbs we put up"*. This stronger sense of togetherness even made them share the prizes with a roommate who did not join the decoration work: *"Our prizes were cushions, we also brought him one. He was surprised and said that he never thought he could also get that prize"*. As noted above and in Chapter 5, there were tensions between this roommate and others in Wei's dorm - sharing collective

prizes with him thus eased their tensions to some extent at that moment, which therefore reveals the positive role that communal decoration of the public dorm space can play in negotiating intimacy and moderating tensions in dorm living. In general, the cases above reflect the importance of collective decoration on the public spaces to dorm togetherness. However, some participants also narrated more interactions about sharing and collective management of the public spaces, associated with more complex relational and emotional experiences – these are discussed in the next section.

Sharing spaces and materials and negotiating public-private boundaries

In addition to decoration, the use of the public central space was also connected by some participants with their social life and emotions in the dorm. For instance, Yongming detailed his daily activities in this space and showed his positive feelings with two emoticons of 'smiley and heart' on the emotion map (see Map 5):

I do push-ups and lift dumbbells here every day, I like doing these here, I feel comfortable and relaxed ... either my roommates or me would not disturb each other, they never interfere with me, and I can make way for them when they go through.
(Yongming, 24/05/2021)

Although displaying personal activities, doing exercises and getting comfortable in the central area of the dorm without disturbing or being interfered with by others reflects a kind of harmonious everyday sharing of this public space between Yongming and his roommates. As McNamara and Connell (2007) suggest, friendly sharing of the space and objects in mundane life in a shared household can help sharers build a sense of community, which is important to the consolidation of their relational and emotional bonds and their home-making negotiations. Aligning with this argument, the sensory comfort Yongming gets from the public central space of his dorm is not just related to his activities, but also shaped by the friendly and relaxed social atmosphere due to their communal use of this space based on mutual respect and reciprocity. When introducing the public central space of his dorm, Yongming particularly emphasised the dumbbell usually stored and used in a corner of this space, with specific photo and emoticons (see Map 5). In this space, this dumbbell particularly illustrates the togetherness between Yongming and a roommate:

This dumbbell is his, but I can use it at any time, don't have to borrow, because we have a good relationship, we often share things ... I like doing exercises, so I kind of want to thank him [the owner of the dumbbell] ... these two emoticons [circled on Map 5] ... they are the same to those in the central area, because I just want to show the same good feelings I have about this dumbbell and our relationship. (Yongming, 24/05/2021)



Photo 21: The dumbbell Yongming's roommate shares with him

Based on Yongming's narrative and the images he offered, the public central space and the objects placed there can shape both the senses of dorm belonging in general and the friendships between certain roommates. Moreover, Yongming's account demonstrates the interplay between the social and material aspects of his shared dorm living. On one hand, the shared use of this public space can influence the interactions and harmony construction in his dorm, yet these material practices can also be affected by the proximity and tensions among these young people.

This interweaving is also reflected in their use of the shared desk area in the public central space. According to Yongming's narratives and images, the desks and shelves in his dorm are combined and placed together in the public space. However, Yongming and his roommates still had individual spaces in the shared desk area. He also regards his own desk space as his 'little world' to which he shows much affinity: *"I like this space very much, because I can do a lot of things here every day; I can put my pads here, I often play video games and study here... I brought this chair for myself [see Photo 19] to sit more comfortably"*. He can maintain exclusive use and curation of his desk area and manifest the harmonious communal use of the public central space in his dorm, demonstrating a unanimous clear public-private boundary in the spatial sharing: *"We just use our own parts of the desk and shelves, we usually don't use others"* (Yongming).



Photo 22: The desk area of Yongming's dorm

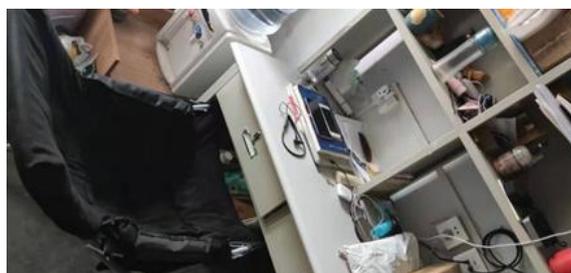
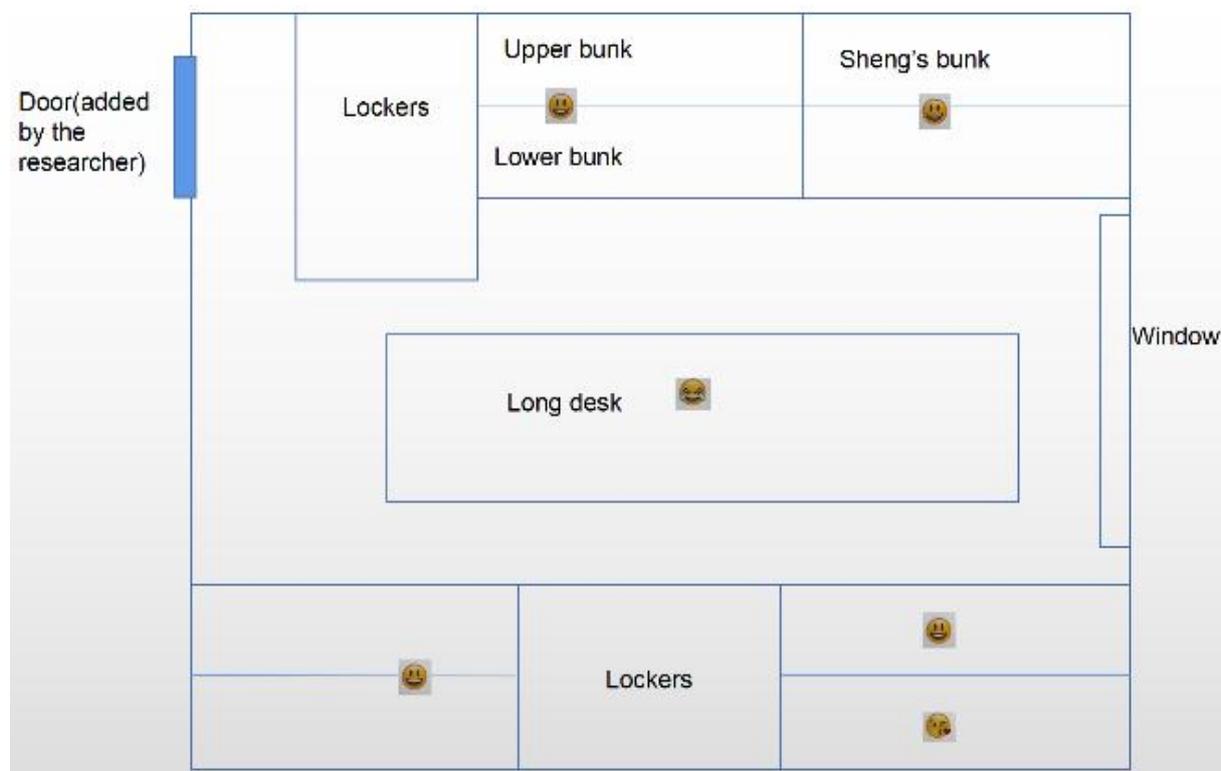


Photo 23: Yongming's personal desk area

The interplay between sharing furniture and developing intimacy is also narrated by Wanyin who shares a mirror with her roommates: *“Every day, we crowd in front of the mirror to make up and dress up, we jostle each other, it’s boisterous but fun”* (Wanyin). According to Wanyin, she and her roommates get along well and always interact in a relaxed and humorous way. This interaction style influenced their way of sharing the mirror. On the other hand, this humorous material sharing practice also increased their shared fun time, which helped consolidate and further promote their intimate emotional bonds. However, according to the interviews, not every dorm can experience a harmonious sharing practice around this issue. For example, Sheng narrated a dispute between one of his roommates and the rest of them in terms of the position of their shared desk:

Our desk is a big, long desk, we usually used it together without very clear division ... That guy didn’t like the position of this desk and we didn’t get any agreement on it after discussions. Then he brought himself a small desk and put it near the dorm door. It looked like a kind of demonstration, and it brought us some trouble getting in

and out of the dorm ... It left me dumbfounded and speechless; that's what I display on this map. (Sheng, male, graduate, 23/06/2021)



Map 16: Sheng's dorm

As reflected by the differences between Yongming and Sheng in the sharing experiences of the public central space, the intertwining between this collective material practice and the social relations in this space can change and is unpredictable. A successful sharing agreement can help form roommate proximity, it can also be facilitated by the friendships between certain roommates or the friendly atmosphere of the whole dorm. In this sense, this space can promote everyone's sense of dominance over dorm living and sense of interdependence between each other, which can accelerate the home-making process (McNamara and Connell, 2007). However, unsuccessful agreement on the communal use of this space and the relevant objects can cause dorm conflicts. Sometimes tensions can result in discomfort in both emotions and daily life, which can further intensify conflicts. In this process, emotional negotiations with roommates and control over this communal space can play crucial roles, demonstrating the conclusions of many researchers that people's senses of belonging or home to a residential space and life are closely related to a sense of control over this space and life (e.g., Inness, 1992; Brickell, 2012; Heath *et al.*, 2017). This argument has been demonstrated in my discussions on participants' personal retreats, but the

discussions in this section reveal the importance of a sense of control over the public dorm spaces to a student's sense of belonging to the dorm and the cohesion generated among roommates.

Moreover, this process can also be shaped by the materialities of the public dorm spaces. Tong (female, graduate) narrated the social significance of the spatial design and facilities of the inner bathrooms in her college dorms, especially the second one she was assigned to: *"The bathrooms were very spacious and clean, there were enough washing basins, taps and showers, so we could use them without any conflict; there were also enough spaces to put buckets and plastic bowls"*. Using 'happy' emoticons on the emotion map, Tong showed her feelings about the daily use of these bathrooms: *"I was satisfied with them [bathrooms] in general. This is good for our communal use of these bathrooms, everyone felt comfortable with these designs"*. As revealed by this account, capacious structure and sufficient facilities can make every member of the dorm feel freer to use the inner bathrooms according to their personal needs, which can maintain their sense of dominance of these spaces in daily life and prevent the potential tensions related to communal utility of these spaces.



Map 17: Tong's second dorm

The formation of a sense of control and its interrelations with roommates' emotional ties within public space management was also raised in narratives about the boundary between

this space and personal retreats. For example, Yanli discussed how this boundary and the relevant material and social management can be shaped by the material design and furnishing of the dorm:

Each of us had an individual desk and wardrobe, that was quite clear and there was no need to divide or discuss anything ... each of us put almost all personal belongings in the relatively independent personal space; no one would touch each other's place or things just as they like, we're all clear ... Our dorm was spacious and there were enough communal facilities. I think a good design of the dorm is very important, it can really help us prevent many potential problems in the shared living.
(Yanli, female, graduate, 21/02/2021)

For Yanli, the possession of some facilities with abundant public things to use and the relatively self-contained space for each person can help form relatively clear boundaries between personal and public spaces, which can give these young people stronger senses of control over their personal space, the public space and the shared living. These can further avoid potential irritations or disagreement in their emotional and relational negotiation.

In contrast, for some participants, material design or furnishings with less independent facilities or self-contained spaces were more likely to break the public-private boundaries. For example, Anli narrated how the design of her bed influenced her experiences of the public-private boundaries in daily dorm living: *"I was in a lower bunk in the first dorm, sometimes others would sit on my bunk, which might cause me inconvenience ... This problem didn't happen in my second dorm where I had a loft-bed ... I was satisfied with the bed in my second dorm"*. Like Mingyu, Anli also lived in two dorms during her college study, due to departmental arrangements. Her experience in her first dorm reflects a relatively weaker sense of control over her private space. Some participants like Boju (male, graduate) also mentioned the moments when they lost power of their personal bunk: *"Sometimes people from other dorms would just sit on my [lower] bunk when they came to my dorm to chat with my roommates... I didn't like others sitting on my bunk, but what else can I do? My dorm was small and there were few spaces to take a seat"*. Thus, bunk beds – especially lower bunks – are more likely to weaken the border between public and private spaces, due to their lack of spatial independence. This can make this type of personal retreat more likely to be invaded, compared with loft-beds.

According to the interviews, the relatively higher security of the private spaces shown in Yanli's account was widely presented in the accounts about dorms with loft-beds. Most college roommates of these dorms respect each other's private space around their bed areas and usually do not take the objects in these spaces without permission. Nevertheless, some participants also referred to exceptions, mainly about how their personal belongings on their personal desks were used or taken by roommates without their permission. For instance, *"I found my new mascara cream was used by someone when I was not in the dorm"* (Yingying); *"A roommate always use our napkins freely, it is a little annoying, because she uses ours every day"* (Yang); *"A guy often takes my things from my desk even without a notice...because of this, sometimes I cannot find the things I need on my desk"* (Ying). As revealed by these narratives, although there can be intangible borders between the public space and personal loft-bed areas agreed among college roommates, the lack of physical boundaries like doors can reduce the independence and privacy of these personal spaces, which can further impair these young people's senses of control over their personal belongings in these spaces.

To manage these tensions, especially the related irritations, most of these young people used non-conflict approaches such as constructive communication or just keeping quiet and being tolerant. Most of them usually do not take much care about the items which are not very valuable or personal, like stationery or tissues. Some participants mentioned the role played by relationships in their choices. For example, *"The public-private boundaries can be vague for roommates in good relationships, but the boundaries can be clear if the relationships are not close"* (Feng); *"In the current dorm, I care about the public-private boundaries, but in my previous dorm, we were relatively freer due to our intimacy"* (Mingyu); *"We didn't care much about the [public-private] border, because we get along very well"* (Mei); *"It depends on the relationships, I wouldn't mind much if our relationships are not bad, but for those whom I'm not that close to, I may want to set up clear boundaries"* (Yang). In this sense, like other practices focusing on this public dorm space, how these young people set up spatial borders also embodies the interrelations between the material dorm environment and social relationship negotiations in dorm living.

Apart from the above experiences, dealing with the open structure and high spatial communality of a university dorm also involves coping with issues like noise, light or smell. Heath and colleagues (Heath *et al.*, 2017) noted the problems like noise and smell caused by sharers in the shared household. As particularly discussed in Chapter 5, being disturbed by things like noise, light and bad air also happens in Chinese university dormitories. As

observed in Chapter 5, the problems of noise and light caused by roommates at night due to different bedtimes are particularly common. For example, Mingyu discussed in his account how the problems of noise and light annoyed him so much. However, according to Jianning and Yi (male, first year), the special structure of their dorms can also help ease these tensions.

In Jianning's dorm building, there was a common study room on the top floor, thus those who wanted to stay up late at night could stay there. Similarly, in Yi's dorm, their beds and desks were positioned in different rooms, thus those who did not want to sleep could go to another room. Such a structure did not necessarily totally address the irritations, for example, Jianning was still disturbed by her noisy roommates at night. Nevertheless, their stories reflect that the spatial separation in the structure can to some extent help deal with some problems of shared living, especially those that may be more serious in the highly communal environment. As noted in Chapter 2, some Chinese universities set up certain public sites in dorm buildings separate from dorm rooms, like public study rooms. The above two cases reflect the effects of these policy evolutions on students' shared dorm living. They also reveal the significance of the spatial design of university student dorms to college roommates' social relationship negotiations in everyday dorm living, especially tension management.

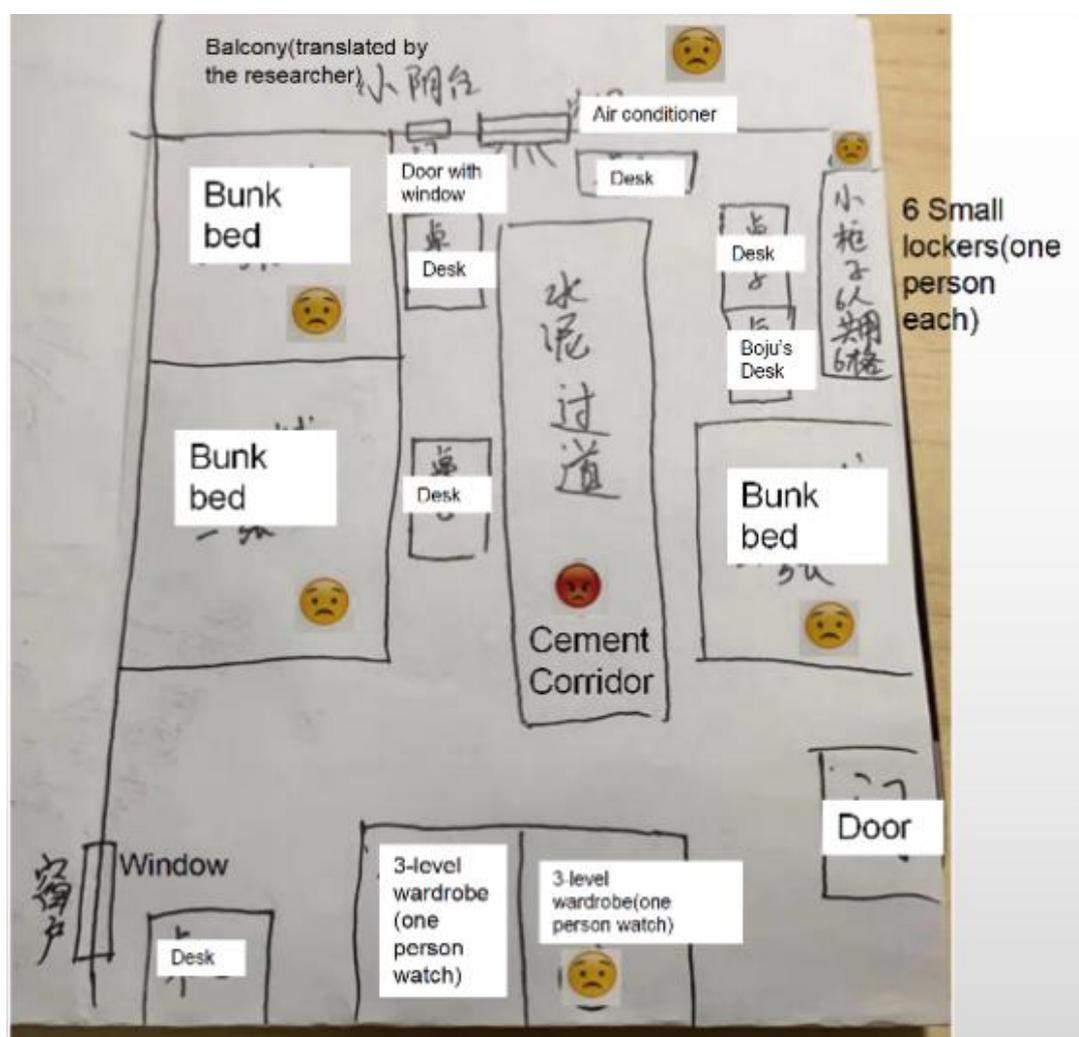


Photo 24: The independent living room of Yi's dorm (Yi and his roommates study here, separated from the bedroom)

In general, this subsection shows the interweaving between relational and emotional bonds and dorm design in these young people's experiences of sharing public dorm spaces, including communal and personal objects and setting up public-private boundaries. In addition, 'being socially smart', discussed in Chapter 5, is also demonstrated by some participants in terms of these practices and is examined in the next section.

'Being socially smart' and managing spatial communality

For the narratives demonstrating the notion of 'being socially smart' in sharing the highly communal dorm space and dealing with public-private issues, some participants like Boju stressed this strategy based on the consideration of the spatial limits of the residential environment: *"That is a dormitory, you know, if you don't want to lose anything, you wouldn't get along with your roommates... the living conditions in our dorm were very bad, so we wouldn't be able to live together at all if we were concerned too much about the public-private boundary"*. In Boju's interview, he showed great dissatisfaction with the material environment of his college dorm which he thought was narrow and crude. He displayed these emotions on his emotion map, on which every emoticon is used to express his negative feelings about the dorm design or furnishing:



Map 18: Boju's dorm

In this way, Boju shows the effects of materiality in the shared living environment where the architectural spaces and furnishings both caused uncomfortable sensory experiences. As

noted earlier, deficient material design or furnishings can cause tensions, thus generous attitudes toward material related issues, particularly the public-private separations highlighted by Boju, are also an approach to prevent or ease tensions and maintain dorm harmony. Similar comments were presented in Chen's account:

You should know that if you don't want to lose anything, your roommates may regard you as mean and difficult and this may further influence your emotions and your relationships. But it depends on what you want from dorm living. If your personal stuff is most important to you, you don't care how others think of you and you don't want to be close to them, then you don't have to share your things if you don't like. Otherwise, you'd better be generous. Just make your choice and take the consequences. (Chen, 18/01/2021)

Chen's account focuses on the balance between having a sense of control over personal belongings and maintaining togetherness with roommates, based on these young people's definitions and perceptions of a comfortable dorm living.

Both controlling personal belongings and maintaining togetherness are elements of homemaking in shared dorm living, but Chen's narrative demonstrates the tension in these areas and that they may not always be compatible. As examined in Chapter 5, some participants spoke of irritations caused by cleanliness issues in their dorm living. Most of these issues related to public spaces, including the central areas and bathrooms. However, these cleanliness related annoyances can often be eased with everyday communication or just tolerance.

Apart from the emotional ties and other practical considerations, the design of public spaces also plays an important role in some participants' management of these issues. According to the narratives discussed in Chapter 5, the tensions associated with dorm cleanliness issues are mainly caused by a sense of unfairness in the divergence of the cleaning work. Nevertheless, the cleaning work itself is usually described as "*not much to do*" in the interviews, for example: "*Our dorm is very small and can be cleaned in a short time*" (Mo). In this way, for some participants like Yi, even though some roommates did not contribute to collective cleaning of the public spaces, he said "*It's not a big task, I don't need to argue with them about it*". Thus, some participants' practical or socially smart attitudes towards cleaning related irritations is also shaped by the material structure and size of the dorms, due to

which there may be relatively more emotional discomfort than physical or temporal wastage caused by the unequal collective cleanliness issues.

In general, public dorm spaces can be associated with college roommate's emotional and relational negotiations in different ways. Through sharing or arranging the communal spaces and facilities, including managing public-private boundaries in this process, these young people's emotional experiences and relationship negotiations are shaped by these spaces and furnishings. On the other hand, these interactions and relationships also influence the functions or appearance of these spaces and objects, especially offering them social significance. As reflected by some data, spatial separations in structure can be of use to help these young people ease the tensions that are closely related to this spatial communality. Moreover, some strategies based on the idea of 'being socially smart' are also applied by participants in the management of the spatial communality in shared dorm living.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed how young people's relationship negotiation and the materials in shared residences engage with each other through the way they feel about the physical dorm environment and the relevant relational and emotional exchanges. Following Blunt's (2005) suggestion that home is a place made up of material and emotional practices, this chapter reflects the complexity of home-like negotiations in dorm living, with the emplacement of participants' multisensory spatial experiences. In the highly open environment, these young people can still create and curate some personal retreats, including private bunk or loft-bed areas, the balcony or the negotiated private areas within the communal space like the part of the desk. How these personal spaces are organised and how these college roommates share the communal space and objects and manage the public-private boundaries intertwine with these college roommates' relational and emotional negotiations, including tension management, in shared dorm living. Meanwhile, the material design of the dorm space or certain facilities can also affect the mundane interactions and relationship experiences among these college roommates.

Through exploring the material culture of these young people's dorms, this chapter demonstrates the importance of the physical space, objects and individual sensory to the social relationship negotiations involved in residential living in Chinese university dorms. However, this got less concern in the studies of Chinese university roommate relationships. As argued in Chapter 2, most existing literature focuses much more on college roommate

relationships from an individualised and psychological or even abstract perspective, missing out the material environment. Although a few researchers briefly mentioned spatial communality, they use it merely as simple background information to show that students with different lifestyles living together can encounter conflicts (see for example Gao, 2013), without further discussion. Although there are a few studies focusing on the relations between the architecture of college dormitories and students' comfort (see for example, Zhao, 2015), these studies are conducted from an architectural and psychological rather than a sociological perspective and thus the association between the sensory and social relationships needed further exploration. So, this chapter bridges these gaps by illustrating the materiality of the roommate relationships and the social and affective significance of the physical conditions of Chinese university dormitories.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

Introduction

This concluding chapter summarises the key findings of this research in relation to the research questions and then extrapolate their main contributions to three key areas of the literature: the sociology of friendship, the sociology of shared living, and the sociology of higher education. Apart from the academic contributions, the policy and management impacts of this research are also discussed in this chapter. Meanwhile, it also reflects on the methods and the limits and possible research directions in the future. As presented in previous chapters, this research conducted micro explorations of undergraduates' everyday life and interpersonal relationships in Chinese university dormitories. It applied a relational, spatial and critical lens to the study of Chinese college roommate relationships, offering a different perspective to existing studies oriented by official policy and psychological interpretations. It also extended the sociologies of friendship, shared living and higher education (HE) into a new global context through a fine-grained analysis of everyday life and relationships in Chinese university student accommodation. This research is organised in response to three research questions:

1. In what ways do Chinese university student residential policies and publicity conceive and present shared living and social relationships in student dormitories?
2. How do young people manage and negotiate social relationships in shared living?
3. How are these social relationships shaped by the material shared space?

This chapter first reviews how these research questions have been addressed and the key findings from the data. The second section of the chapter focuses on the key themes and discusses how these fit with and advance the understandings in the existing research on Chinese university roommate relationships and the sociological debates of friendship, shared living and higher education. In the third section, I discuss the implications of my research on the policies and management of Chinese university student accommodation. Then I reflect on the mix of document analysis, semi-structured interviews and visual methods I used in the research, including their relations with my personal experiences of university dorm living, their benefits and limits and how they helped open up a new research agenda in the academic fields of friendship, shared living and higher education. Finally, the chapter summarises the limits of the study and points which require more work to explore and the potential pathways for future research.

7.1 Research Questions and Key Findings

7.1.1 How Chinese university policies and publicity conceive and present shared living and social relationships in student dormitories

In Chapters 2 and 4 I analysed documents relating to the policies and publicity of official websites across ten Chinese universities, involving the layout of students' residential environment, their residential life and relationships. Although these universities are from various areas and from different institutions in the Chinese HE hierarchy, I argued in Chapter 2 that there are remarkable similarities between them in how they arrange and present students' accommodation: undergraduates' dorm living and roommate relationships engineered by these universities in their policies and publicity are generally shaped by rules; the dormitories are often portrayed as 'home' for these young people to share with their roommates and build family-like relationships; but dorm living is constructed more importantly as a kind of training site, from which students are expected to learn how to be a 'good' citizen in society.

Dorms as regulated residential places

A key finding from the websites and policy literature is that dorms are highly regulated spaces, subject to a wide range of university-implemented rules and highly homogeneous standards of physical structure and furnishing. As outlined in Chapter 2, despite some nuances in the detailed architectural design and furnishing, the residential spaces for undergraduates in these universities are all shared dormitories. Each dormitory room is shared by more than two people and is highly communal in terms of spatial structure, within which most furniture including students' beds and desks are placed in the same space. In some types of dormitories, there are also shared balconies and ensuite bathrooms. By creating these shared residences, these universities offer their undergraduate students highly planned micro spaces where young people need to live together with several others in one room and negotiate the relevant collective living and relationships.

Other aspects of students' lives are also highly regulated. For instance, as shown in Chapter 2, these universities set up many rules focusing on students' personal and fire safety. For example, living in the university dormitory is mandatory and high-powered appliances are not allowed to be used in the dormitory. These universities also require students to keep the dorms clean and they set up regular inspections of dormitory sanitation. The solidarity and

harmony of the roommate relationship is also highlighted by many of these universities. It is also reflected in Chapter 2 about the systems of rewards and punishment widely established by the universities: these systems clearly link students' compliance with the residential regulations to their applications for scholarships or other awards.

However, what is clear in the online and policy documents is that dorms are always presented as being a students' 'home' on campus. This intersects with the high regulation of dorm living and is the second key theme discussed in Chapter 2. Based on the concept of 'home', college roommates are expected to work together to make the living environment safe and clean and build harmonious and reciprocal social relationships. This idea is mainly emphasised in the universities' publicity of student dormitory culture and relevant events like dormitory cultural festivals, acting as the core notion and presented in various forms. For example, Chapter 2 shows how the concept of 'home sharing' is reflected in the poster on the web page about dormitory culture at A University, in which there is a drawing of collective dormitory cleaning and a slogan that reads: *"My home is small, but we get four people here"* (A University). Similar presentations of this idea can also be found in the guidelines of residential regulations and the reports of dormitory inspections, displayed as the title or underlined as the guiding concept. In this sense, 'home sharing' is a key conceptual basis underpinning these universities' framing and management of students' dormitory residence.

However, there are also many explicit and extensive restrictions on this shared living and how students deal with them can often result in clearer rewards or punishments. The tensions between being a rule-bound and a home space directly shape young people's senses of belonging and proximity built in their shared dorm living as they navigate these, and this was a focus of discussion in Chapter 5. Running through universities' regulations and publicity of student dormitories, the notion of 'home sharing' emphasises on students' abilities and responsibility to take care of their dormitories to a home standard and establish family-like shared living and roommate relationships. In this way, the nature of the student residence framed by these universities is not just a kind of surrogate 'home' but also a type of 'training' for these young people's competency for living, particularly collective living, and negotiating social relationships.

Dorm living as a training site for being a 'good' citizen in society

As Chapter 2 showed, framing such type of regulation-oriented accommodation with fundamental ideas of 'home sharing' and 'competency training', these universities' core aim

is to cultivate young people's citizenship. Areas including civilised and healthy lifestyles, awareness of safety, order, mutual help and friendship and collective spirit are highlighted by many of these universities through their websites as the purposes of the regulations on student residences and the relevant activities, which are implementations of governmental policy and perceptions on university student dormitories. As noted in Chapter 2, the government defines university student dormitories as *"important places for students' daily life and study and key positions for their ideological and quality-oriented education to them"* (Ministry of Education of China, 2004). More than just getting a place to live and study, these young people are expected by the government to grow in terms of ideology and morality through their dorm living to achieve all-round development. Therefore, guiding these young people's thinking and behaviours is a clear priority in these universities' framing work of student residences.

The notion of creating competent citizenship is further interpreted and publicised by the governmental media. For example, an article published in *Guangming Daily*, a mainstream newspaper, portrays the university student dormitory as *"small society"*, *"big family"* and an *"invisible classroom"*, where students are supposed to forge public ethics and values, learn to respect common regulations, care for each other, exchange ideas and develop together to become useful to the future of the country (Du, 2016). This concept and its criteria direct these universities' evaluations of students' behaviours and relationship situations in dorms. Students are guided or sometimes required to reach these standards and those who perform well are selected as 'role models' to set examples to others of what they should do in the dorms.

As discussed in Chapter 2, comments from Chinese mainstream media on dormitory tensions or conflicts are also influenced by the idea of creating competent citizens, focusing on personal factors like these young people's mental health and different habits (see for example Li, 2017b), and attributing tensions to their lack of interpersonal competences and collective spirit (see for example Liang, 2010). Sometimes these are further linked to their general identity as the generations of 'the only-child of the family' who are thought to be over-spoiled and self-centred (see for example Hui, 2013). Moreover, as reflected in the literature of roommate relationship research focusing on Chinese universities in Chapter 2, the notion that these young people should gain a sense of collectivistic-oriented citizenship and the relevant social competences through the shared university dorm living is followed by many scholars, presented as their research assumptions and then in the general rationales of their main debates, particularly in the static and dualistic view of either good or bad

roommate relationships and the tendency of attributing roommate conflicts to students' lack of social skills and sense of solidarity (e.g., Liang, 2008; Huang and Guo, 2016).

Thus, the findings I generated from the university website analysis suggests a close unity between existing research, governmental and university policies and media viewpoints in attitudes towards university student dormitories and roommate relationships, including dorm conflicts. In this sense, they also reflected the importance of developing a different exploratory gaze from students' practical dorm living experiences, which then facilitated the main discussions of Chapters 5 and 6. By demonstrating the institutional context of students' dorm living, my discussions in Chapter 2 also helped explain how the institutional environment, especially residential rules, play roles in these college roommates' dorm living and relationship negotiations, argued in the empirical chapters – this is summarised below.

7.1.2 How shared dorm living and social relationships are managed and negotiated by Chinese college students

Through semi-structured interviews and visual methods, I gained a variety of accounts from my participants about how they and their roommates managed and negotiated the shared dorm living and their relationships. As discussed in Chapter 5, roommate relationships are dynamic and ambivalent. They involve an emotional range from closeness to distance and the data showed how young people manage to negotiate roommate friendships, including tensions, revealing the social and emotional skills and competences students develop for collective living. These strategies were presented across genders and amongst students of varied social backgrounds. Residential rules set by universities can add tension as well as help increase proximity in young people's roommate relationships. In some cases, increased closeness is built upon small-scale rule-breaking, a collective rebellion against the various rules and expectations of the universities.

Dorm living requires social and emotional competences

Based on my discussions in Chapter 5, a key finding is that these young people can build and develop positive bonds with roommates in shared living through shared routines and rituals, caring practices, and studying together. In terms of shared routines and rituals, many participants talked about the leisure time they spent inside or outside the dorm with their college roommates - some particularly highlighted the humorous interactions which made the atmosphere easier and more friendly for everyone, for example, as participant Wei Song

explained, *"I think it should be the moment when all of us four are relaxed. We joked with each other, showed our most naughty and euphoric sides. This process was relaxing and enjoyable"*.

Chapter 5 detailed the ways in which food-sharing routines or rituals were important. Several participants like Wanyin (female, third year) highlighted the necessity of *"closing the bond among people living in a dorm"*. Most of them talked about the habitual sharing of snacks or fruit in their dorms. Although there are rules and limits on normal cooking, as mentioned in Chapter 2, there are still practices of having takeaway together, sharing mealtimes in the dining hall, or even rituals like the New Year's Eve Dinner with simple meal for *"a special get-together"* (Wei) were central to building intimacy in the dorm. Celebratory events were also important in this process. Many participants also discussed birthday celebrations and gift giving, narrating the amusing, surprising or touching emotional experiences they got from the celebration styles and the gifts.

As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, these young people also established a sense of belonging through caring between roommates. Based on participants' comments, caring practices include not only exceptional and urgent care or protection involving roommate's health or personal safety, but also considerations or mutual help in mundane interactions. Whatever the caring experience was, they all helped college roommates build mutual trust and cohesion or affection. The effects of the university institutional environment on the togetherness in dormitories is also a key finding. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Chinese college roommates do not just live together but in many cases also study together. Sometimes this can lead to enhanced collaboration, consolidating and strengthening bonds between roommates, though sometimes this enforced togetherness can promote tension.

As shown in the thesis, the above approaches to constructing affective bonds demonstrated how young people acquire and develop the awareness and competences of being together with roommates to create cohesive communal living and a sense of group in both domestic and wider university life. This seems to be what the universities expect, as noted in Chapter 2. However, my discussions in Chapter 5 also reflect that living together and forming a sense of proximity with roommates are not always as rewarding and intimate as presented by the universities. Instead, roommate relationships can become strained over time and challenged by the negotiations of shared living. With the development of roommate interactions and university life, some participants wanted to find out more aspects of their roommates, while others started to feel more ambivalent about their roommates. The ambivalence experienced

by many participants from their shared living and relationship negotiations is another key finding discussed in Chapter 5 about the complexity of roommate relationships.

The negative experiences intertwined with the positive experiences in relationship negotiations are mainly caused by the gradually manifested irritations in shared living. For example, plenty of participants gradually encountered various conflicts and tensions caused by issues like dorm cleanliness, noise and light disturbance, particularly at night, and stale air. Some participants who felt their irritations were not echoed by other roommates mentioned feelings of loneliness or even incompatibility with the dorm atmosphere. Some of these negative emotions were caused by practices originally aimed at promoting roommate friendships, for example, some participants spoke about misunderstandings and quarrels caused by improper jokes, feelings of ambivalence between a sense of obligation and annoyance when taking care of drunk roommates, or feelings that a roommate's birthday gift lacked sincerity and further suspecting about the meaning of this dormitory ritual.

In terms of interactions related to study, the disputes, jealousy and sarcasm of roommates, and the pressure or even stressful dorm atmosphere brought about by hard-working roommates also emerged in these young people's dorm living and caused unease. These negative emotions can often co-exist and interweave with the times of closeness, which increases the complexity of the negotiations of dorm living and social relationships. Students' ability to negotiate and manage these complexities was also greatly influenced by the architectural limitations of the dorm itself, which impacted on the possibilities of creating physical and social distance, as discussed in Chapter 6. In this way, these young people not only acquired the competences to create a sense of group belonging and togetherness in shared living, but also developed strategies to manage social tensions.

Being 'socially smart' and social tension management

In this unstable everyday social context, Chapter 5 discussed how the participants developed tactics to manage social tensions. Based on the positive sides of roommate relationships, many participants demonstrated tolerance for their roommates' behaviours. Some reflected upon the positive emotions they had gained from roommate friendships or the dependency forged with roommates in other aspects of interactions such as collaborations in studying, drawing upon these reflections to enable them to react peacefully or simply endure the actions of others. Some participants used humour when responding to

tensions based on the humorous interactive modes which they were used to in everyday dorm living.

From some participants' accounts of their attitudes of managing the day-to-day irritations in the dorms, there emerged a concept which I summarised as 'being socially smart'. This involved viewing the college dorm living practically and diplomatically to select the best available strategy, deciding when to let things go, when to do time-outs or when to try and negotiate an agreement. For example, Huan's narrative, examined in Chapter 5, demonstrated a typical expression of this concept:

Nothing can 100% satisfy you. You should make sure what is more important to you and what is less ... you can sacrifice something less important for something more important if necessary. I'm disturbed by the noise caused by my roommates ... but I won't intensify the tension and break our closeness, because we get along well and can help each other in other aspects, that is more important to me. (Huan, 16/04/2021)

Similar to the notion of being 'socially smart', another type of practical-oriented idea I summarised from some participants' tension management approach is 'keeping superficial harmony but practical distance'. In Chapters 5 and 6, I discussed Mingyu's (male, second year) experience as an example of how students deal with noisy roommates, particularly those who are difficult to communicate with. Mingyu, like many others, dealt with this situation by spending time outside the dorm in the daytime as much as possible, creating isolated private space in the dorm and limiting interactions with roommates. Mingyu deliberately avoided contributing further to the tensions and described his attitude as "*playing it cool*" instead, thus maintaining a peaceful relationship on the surface but more a sense of distance rather than intimacy in practice.

In this sense, through developing ideas about 'being socially smart' and maintaining superficial social harmony, many participants acquired the social skills of peaceful everyday interaction and conflict management in their shared living space and roommate relationships. Most participants, no matter what approach they adopted towards managing tensions, tended to construct an emotional balance and tried to avoid severe conflict. This was not always fully successful. For example, one participant mentioned how he displayed his dissatisfaction and anger directly to the roommates who disturbed him at night, which broke the peace of the dorm but in his words helped him as he felt he addressed the situation

effectively. It was surprising how infrequently this happened in participants' accounts. Although just a single case, it does show that relationship breakdowns can take place and illustrates that the complexity of practical shared living and social interactions, how these young people treat tensions and what social or emotional competences they can acquire are not necessarily as simple as universities assume or wish.

Navigating university accommodation rules and negotiating social relationships

As well as roommate assignment rules, Chapter 5 highlighted the contradictory role played by the rules on dorm living in the interactions and relationships in dormitories. As discussed in Chapter 2, the young people live together in a rule-bound environment framed by universities and there are a range of residential rules attached to their dorm living. According to participants, these rules not only influenced daily life in dormitories, but also affected these college roommates' social relationship negotiations. Some participants discussed in their accounts about how collective rule-keeping helped to promote their friendships with roommates. For example, the increased interaction opportunities with roommates due to the mandatory dorm living and uniformly regulated curfews, and the residential homogeneity and cohesion was boosted by collective rule-keeping activities like collaborating to clean the dorm for inspection. However, collective rule-keeping can also cause or increase unease or tensions in some situations, such as causing alienation among social relationships or dorm atmospheres or through different understandings of the rules. Meanwhile, some participants emphasised a sense of helplessness in either addressing or reducing roommates' annoying behaviours or radically keeping away from them, because they still must live in these shared dorms as regulated and face these issues every day.

Compared with narratives about the tensions of rule-keeping and breaking, a number of participants described how complaining about or breaking the rules together helped them and their roommates generate closer bonds, revealing the unintended effects of these rules to the development of roommate friendships. These examples also reflect a contradiction between cultivating an awareness of regulations and a sense of solidarity with roommates. For example, participant Lin (male, graduate) told how he and his roommates secretly used some banned electric appliances in the dorm and worked together to hide the appliances to avoid being found by the administrator. Lin felt that he and his roommates got closer through the actions they "*did as a group*". In this way, although living in the regulated residential environment dominated by university rules, how these young people understand and deal with such an environment and how it works in their shared living and social interactions can

be multifaceted and sometimes even different from what they are framed to be (by universities or the media). Apart from the negotiations and management of shared dorm living and social relationships, how these are associated with the material environment of dormitories also generated a set of key findings, discussed in the next section.

7.1.3 How the social relationships and interactions in Chinese university dormitories are shaped by the materialities and design of the shared living space

Examining the role of materialities in dorm life, Chapter 6 focused on how the material environments of dormitories shape the dynamic interactions and shifting social relationships discussed in Chapter 5. It was clear across the participants' data (interviews, emotion maps and photographs) that materiality mattered. Material spaces were used differently by participants, but they all shared a tendency to use material things as anchors for both a way of retreating from shared living and for facilitating a sense of proximity and cohesion in relationship negotiations. In these highly shared residences where the physical public-private boundaries are usually blurred, how to make territories between the public spaces for shared use and private spaces belong to individuals is a core concept in the materiality of the interactions and social relationships in dormitories. Setting up public-private boundaries involves the structure and furnishing of the material spaces, but they are also social actions associated with these college roommates' relationship negotiation modes and how intimate they are.

Private spaces and retreating from shared living

Chapter 6 showed how important personal bed and desk spaces are organised by individuals as private spaces and personal retreats. These areas are usually places for privacy, freedom and a sense of control and exclusivity. Many participants reported how they studied or relaxed alone in these spaces, temporarily being away from the communal living environment. Most of them put positive emoticons on the emotion maps to display their comfortable feelings in these spaces. How these private spaces work to the shared living and social relationship is closely associated with participants' organisation of them - bed curtains often played key roles in this. Bed curtains were often used to separate the beds from the public spaces to maintain their relative independence and privacy. Light itself was a key issue in the proximity of shared living and bed curtains were used as a tool to manage light input, with some participants using bed curtains to block out or to stop their own light

disturbing their roommates. As discussed in Chapter 5, light was one of the main issues in shared living environments which caused tensions.

As well as light management, bed curtains were also important in sending social signals, sometimes indicating a participant's need for privacy and retreat from communal living. But the curtains could also be drawn to create a more private space for small groups of roommates who were closer and wanted to create an even smaller social space. The data revealed that another way of using bed curtains was to avoid disturbing others, reflecting a sense of collective responsibility for shared living. Although the closed bed curtains could sometimes be understood as a person removing themselves from shared living, most participants showed how they were aware of this and balanced privacy issues by using the bed curtains in active and responsible ways. For example, some people would not close the bed curtains for a long time while, through mutual agreement, other people and their roommates kept talking or organised short bedtime chats even with the bed curtains closed.

Chapter 6 also demonstrated how individualised decorations made by students comprised another key element of the organisation of their personal spaces. As participants showed in interviews, the personal desk, including attached lockers and shelves and part of the wall, are the main decorated areas. In some cases, the bed curtains are also part of the decorations. Most participants displayed photos of their decorated desks and some of them specifically narrated how and why they did their curation. These curated decorations are related to participants' personal interests or lifestyles, their original home or friendships outside the dorm, expressing their individuality and self-identity and reinforcing their sense of belonging to these retreats. How these students arranged their personal spaces also reflected a process of home making focusing on these retreats rather than the whole dorm - portrayed as 'home' by universities - from which they created and relatively controlled these spaces for their own physical and emotional comfort.

However, these individualised decorations could also facilitate interactions or even togetherness in shared dorm living. The decorated spaces were on display to roommates due to the dorm's open architectural structure, which offered these people chances for mutual influence or communication about each other's individuality or space curation skills. Some participants and their roommates arranged the same type of decorations, some participants used a gift given by the roommate as the main decoration to display their friendship or tried to decrease the possible unease of roommates when selecting certain decor like the desk lamp. Like bed spaces, dormitories which had balconies provided

another space which was valued by participants as balconies could be used for retreat time as well as social time.

Most participants and their roommates expressed mutual respect and understanding of each other's material and social retreating and tacitly set up public-private boundaries, particularly near personal bed and desk areas. They usually do not touch private space without permission. Although how strict the boundaries are can be influenced by how intimate the social relationships are, most participants highlighted the necessity of such a boundary in shared living, especially its significance to prevent the tensions caused by spatial encroachment. Overall, creating private spaces to retreat from collective living at some point was important for these young people; it can facilitate tension management, help prevent conflicts caused by the communality of dorm living and help make the shared living comfortable and regulated in such a university-framed residential space. Although temporarily shielding students from the shared living, personal retreats do not necessarily break cohesion or harmony. Instead, they can guarantee or even promote togetherness.

Public spaces and managing communality

Another set of findings involving the material dorm spaces focuses on the default public spaces. As discussed in Chapter 6, these public spaces usually include the central space, the ensuite bathroom and sometimes the balcony. These spaces can be social spaces where collective memories like fun times and collective curation occur and a sense of cohesion is thus formed. When these college roommates can control these spaces together, they can also gain a sense of home making. However, when the balance cannot be assured, it can also facilitate the emergence of tensions and ambivalence. Whether and how this balance is achieved as interwoven with both the social relationships and the material design or furnishing of dormitories.

Although there are usually social bounds agreed by college roommates between the public and private spaces, sometimes these boundaries can still offer chances to transgress due to the highly open architectural structure of the dormitory, which then causes irritations. These transgressive behaviours can even happen to personal belongings on the personal desks. For example, some participants mentioned that their personal daily necessities, makeup or stationery was used by roommates without notifying them. With this issue, some ideas of 'being smart' emerged: some participants emphasised strategies to adapt to this environment, like keeping personal valuables safe but not caring too much about certain daily necessities. Chen Jiang, for instance, explained his attitudes in detail:

... it depends on what you want from the dorm living. If your personal belongings are most important to you, you don't care how others think of you and you don't want to be close to them, then you don't have to share your things if you don't like. Otherwise, you'd better share. Just make your choice and take the consequences. (Chen, 18/01/2021)

There are also some findings from a few participants indicating that there are some special spaces in their dormitory rooms or buildings, like separate living and study rooms. Although these spaces are not private spaces, they helped avoid or reduce the annoyance caused by issues like noise and light disturbances, which closely involve the highly open architectural structure of the dormitory and the resulting blurred public-private boundary. Like the defaulted private spaces and personal retreating, these separate rooms also reflect the significance of spatial separation or independence on comfortable and harmonious shared dorm living and relationship negotiations.

7.2 Key Contributions to the Sociology of Higher Education, Relationality and Materiality

Sociology of higher education

As discussed in Chapter 3, the main sociological debates of HE, based in both China and the Global North, focus mainly on issues related to social equality. A wide range of current studies tend to explore the influences of people's social status and capital or race on their access to HE and their network, life-course decisions and performance at universities during HE. Most arguments highlight the existence of inequality in HE enrolment towards people from rural, working-class or ethnic minority families (e.g., Yang and Qiu, 2017; Yang, 2014; Xie and Wang, 2006; Boliver, 2015). There are also suggestions reflecting the differences between students with different family backgrounds in higher educational institutions; some particularly emphasised difficulties encountered by those from relatively disadvantaged family backgrounds (e.g., Zhang and Ma, 2018; Loveday, 2016). However, there has been relatively less scrutiny of students' residential life. Distinct from current studies, my research focuses more on students' lived experiences in the higher educational environment. By using a qualitative approach to investigate how university students negotiate their affective ties and social relationships in their lifeworld, my research revealed that students' life during higher

education is more complex and characterised by more issues than social justice or personal backgrounds.

According to my data, there were friendships between the Chinese college roommates with both the similar and different family backgrounds, the same situations were also found in terms of the tensions. In the dorms investigated in my research, my data did not reflect evidence of the social-status differentiation or inequality emphasised in the studies which I mentioned above and in Chapters 2 and 3. Conversely, the students of the same dorm, no matter those from rural or urban areas or any social position, lived in a highly communal environment where they needed to share most of the spaces and facilities and navigate the same residential restrictions from the university; these young people also had the same academic work and belonged to the same class collectives in most cases. Based on my findings, the everyday interactions and relationship negotiations in this living circumstance were mainly influenced by the material and institutional contexts rather than the structural context. Thus, my research revealed that the social structure may not always play a dominant or evident role in people's relationship experiences in higher education, especially in the residential settings with high communality and homogeneity in both the spaces and daily life.

The similar results were also shown in the aspect of gender. As I examined in Chapter 2, there are various or even contradictory arguments on the differences between male and female students in roommate intimacy or tensions in Chinese university dormitories (e.g., Huang and Guo, 2016; Sun, 2014). According to my findings, the complex relational and emotional experiences, no matter positive or negative, could happen in both male and female students' dorms. In this sense, my result agrees with Zhang's (2019) arguments which I discussed in Chapter 2, demonstrating the relationship negotiations which could exist across genders in Chinese university dormitories. However, my research illustrated more multifaceted practices and experiences which did not show clear gender influence, not just the roommate conflicts which Zhang's research focused on.

Drawing upon and further developing a range of literature examined in Chapter 3, my ways of thinking aligned with Brooks' (2007) ideas in her research on university friendships, focusing on students' personal experiences and emphasising that these friendship experiences can be fluid with the changes of contexts in HE. My research also built upon Finn's (2015) application of a relational perspective which highlights the spatial, temporal and emotional aspects of young people's higher educational experiences. In discussing

young people's experiences of shared living in university dormitories, my research has demonstrated the importance of integrating emotional, relational and material facets of dorm-life, highlighting in particular the interpersonal negotiations that are central to students' everyday practices. My research further develops the explorations of students' experiences conducted by Brooks (2007) and Finn (2015), demonstrating how young people's roommate relationships can be fluid and ambivalent, emphasising the acquisition of skills or competencies of cohesion building and tension management, and showing the interplay between domestic, relational, material and institutional issues in how young people negotiate their dorm relationships. Thus, my research advanced the sociological debates on higher education to a wider scale through deeper explorations and more detailed discussions of students' relationship and emotional experiences and introducing the gaze of shared living in university accommodation. In this sense, I also offered more multifaceted interpretations of students' university life by associating the debates with the concepts of materiality which connect social relationships with things (Woodward, 2020) and critical associations suggesting the existence of negative aspects of friendship experiences (e.g., Davies, 2019a; Heaphy and Davies, 2012).

My research also advanced sociological debates focusing on university accommodation. As I showed in Chapter 2, most current Chinese studies on university dorm living and relationships mainly concern conflicts between college roommates and connect the tensions to personal differences or competition (e.g., Liang, 2008; Wang and Wang, 2014). Underpinned by the assumption that college dorm living should be collectivistic-oriented, and that roommates should build a sense of togetherness, many studies tend to further attribute dorm conflicts to young people's incompetence in terms of group awareness and solidarity (e.g., Huang and Guo, 2015; Xianyu, 2016). Different from the existing literature, my research indicates that this assumption and its close connection with the perspective of HE providers, based on a content analysis of ten Chinese universities' websites concerning their policies and publicity about student dorm living and roommate relationships and the "*wider dominant discourses*" underpinning the analysed content (Brooks and Waters, 2015, p. 215).

My findings illustrated the regulation and training-oriented nature of Chinese undergraduate dormitories and its core aim of making students acquire interpersonal and emotional competences to become good citizens. In this way, I argued that the existing academic debates focusing on Chinese contexts are dominated by notions of student management and education from HE providers rather than students' micro lived experiences and

perceptions. My project addressed this knowledge gap and advanced current debates by focusing on students' mundane everyday lives, rather than framing the study within assumptions about the benefits of communal living emphasised by HE providers and outlined in Chapter 2. In so doing it explored how proximity and tension are managed and negotiated, identifying the acquisition of social skills and emotional competences in dormitories and thus moving away from a simplistic or unexamined understanding of dorm relationships as reflections of personal differences, as outlined by other scholars of Chinese student life, or as 'solid', as taken for granted by HE providers.

My research has demonstrated how positive and negative experiences can intertwine; tensions are more than just personal differences or competitions and people can be 'socially smart'. According to the discussions in Chapters 2 and 4, the mix of document analysis, interviews and visual methods I applied in my research, particularly the visual methods, adds a different research approach to the studies of Chinese university dorm living and roommate relationships, because existing research built upon Chinese contexts tends to be more macro and quantitative, forgetting the micro and qualitative exploration, particularly the picture-related methods – and the relevant material significance receives even less attention.

As outlined in Chapter 3, research on the bedroom-sharing university accommodation in other countries like the US is also preoccupied by many quantitative debates on the correlations between student's personality and their satisfaction with roommate relationships or arguments focusing on roommate interactions of several fixed patterns or features (e.g., Carli, Ganley and Pierce-Otay, 1991; Hanasono and Nadler, 2012). In this sense, my emphasis of the fluidity, variety and materiality of social relationships in shared university dorms and their relations to university regulations helps advance the studies focusing on not only Chinese HE, but also a wider HE context, by widening the sociological and structural-oriented understandings to current debates beyond a psychologically oriented, individualised and static lens.

Sociology of relationality

As discussed above, my research contributes to the sociology of higher education by introducing relational and material-oriented notions. On the other hand, my research offers some updates to the field of relationality, especially the sociology of friendships and shared living. As shown in previous chapters (particularly Chapters 3 and 5), my research is underpinned by a relationality and relational approach, exploring people's personal

experiences and negotiations within a relationship and emotional network which involves multifaceted contextual issues, including space and time, sociocultural and institutional environment (Smart, 2007; Finn, 2015). My discussions of participants' practices to get along with each other and their complex dorm living experiences echo existing arguments highlighting the diversity of personal experiences and negotiation strategies in shared living (e.g., Heath *et al.*, 2017; Foulkes *et al.*, 2021).

Like Heath and colleagues' (Heath *et al.*, 2017) research, in my discussions of the irritations and ambivalences at the heart of many dorm relationships, I also applied the idea of critical associations, which reveals both positive and negative friendships, emphasising the significance of friends whilst moving beyond a wholly positive view (Davies and Heaphy, 2011; Heaphy and Davies, 2012). Moreover, the variety, changeability and unpredictability of friendships highlighted by Spencer and Phal (2006), and the embeddedness of friendships in a wider social context emphasised by Allen (1998), are also applied in my research to help reflect the multifaceted, flexible and context-related relationships and emotions experienced and negotiated by students in dorm living. I have further stretched these concepts by applying them to a different empirical context, where the particularly intense physical and social proximities experienced by those living in Chinese dormitories, along with the high level of regulation on residential life enforced by university rules and policies, result in particular relational strains and risks.

In the context of Chinese universities, students live closely in highly communal spaces and their residential lives are regulated by university policies and rules. This usually means four years of mandatory shared living with fixed dorms and roommates, different from the more unstable and mobile types of shared living discussed by Heath and colleagues (Heath *et al.*, 2017). These college roommates not only live together but also often study together and thus have more complex bonds, distinct from either the household sharers or friends concerned in the above research or family relationships studied by Smart (2007). By applying the above ideas of shared living and friendships in such a context, my research further unpacked how critical associations and diversified and dynamic friendships can take place and be negotiated in everyday shared life in which the source of challenges can go beyond domestic issues. My discussions also demonstrated how the ebbs and flows of people's relationship and emotional experiences in such a shared living can be shaped by their study, official residential rules and the material living environment. In this way, my research contributed more detailed understandings and wider empirical applications to the current sociological debates of critical associations, friendships and shared living.

Through linking the above notions with this university accommodation context and discussing this context at the institutional, governmental and media levels noted in Chapter 2, my research offers explicit empirical discussions around Allen's point (1998) about the importance of social context in friendships. Friendships built in college students' shared accommodations have been mentioned in research by Spencer and Pahl (2006) and Finn (2015), both highlighting the significance of interactions in this place away from home and the proximity built through increased interactions characteristic of student shared living accommodation. Spencer and Pahl particularly described student friends, especially those in shared residences, as "*simply fun companions*" (2006, p. 90) but from which there can still be strong intimacy generated. The above suggestions about friendships between university students who live together supported part of my findings of the closeness in dormitories, but my research further enriched the discussions of what kind of relationships can form in university accommodation and how they are experienced.

Based on the annoyances and tensions of dorm living, which I found and discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, my research argued that there can also be negative relationships and ambivalence can emerge from the interactions in these young people's shared accommodation. Meanwhile, in addition to demonstrating how students create intimacy in shared living away from home, my research also reflects upon how these students are socially smart not only in terms of their ability to negotiate interpersonal relationships but also in their navigation of the material, ideological and institutional frames of these relationships. By demonstrating how these social and emotional experiences are embedded with people's different reactions and approach to the regulations and the high communality of the material residential space, my research updates and deepens the discussions of university students' shared living and friendship negotiations in a new global context where there are different cultural norms and expectations around relationships.

Materiality

As mentioned earlier, focusing on material dorm spaces forms a key contribution to my research to the sociology of HE and shared living and friendships. However, my arguments in turn also advance the sociological debates on the materiality of roommate relationships in shared university dorm spaces. As discussed mainly in Chapters 1, 3 and 6, my conclusions demonstrate the significance of the material living environment and objects to people's interpersonal relationships in shared dorm living, reinforcing the connections between people and things rather than the dualism of objects and subjects in social relation explorations

(Woodward, 2020; Miller, 2005). Underpinned by the concept of material culture which emphasises the active roles played by things in shaping social environments, personhood and identity (Woodward, 2020; Hurdley, 2006; Tilley, 1999), my research also showed the centrality of material culture constructed in students' experiences in university dormitories. As argued in previous chapters, how people use, organise and feel about the spaces and objects in their dorms can shape and be shaped by their selfhood and social relationships in dorm living and university life. However, the material dormitory culture shown by my research, in terms of organisation of personal retreats, public-private boundaries and spatial communality management, consists of more complex relationships, emotional experiences and a space where people live in close proximity to each other. Alongside the interplay between social relationships and things that are the focus of many current debates, my research highlighted the engagement of the HE institutional environment in the materiality of shared dorm living and relationships. Moreover, my discussions applied relational concepts including complex friendships and critical associations to demonstrate how these spatial environments and objects express and shape multifaceted and unfixed interactions and feelings in day-to-day dorm living. In this sense, my research enriched the empirical applications and embodiment of materiality theory, by demonstrating how this theory can work in such a more complex and special circumstance which has been so far overlooked.

As I presented in previous chapters, the significance of material spaces and objects are mentioned in a number of existing studies of shared living or homes in some studies. For example, there are discussions highlighting how the openness of private bedrooms and the sharing of public spaces affect intimacy or how bedroom decorations are connected to a sense of belonging and individualization in the shared or family household (e.g., Heath *et al.*, 2017; Finn, 2015; Lincoln, 2014; Fidzani and Read, 2012); some arguments stress the significance of possessions to personal relationships or domestic bonds (e.g., Smart, 2007; Drazin, 2001); others reflect the relations between people's sense of homemaking or *unmaking* to the places they stay and their sensory experiences and organisations of the material conditions of these places (Baxter and Brickell, 2014; Nasreen and Ruming, 2021). My discussions of the materiality of dorm living and relationships echoed these debates to some extent. However, these debates mainly focus on shared houses with relatively separate private bedrooms and public spaces, or unstable and short-term or transitional shared living accommodation, or family life and relationships.

In this way, my arguments further developed these debates by illustrating how they can be presented in a different context. My research reflects how people negotiate the public-private

boundaries in a shared residence where the territories between public and private spaces are much blurrier. My findings showed how they use bed curtains and personalised decorations to organise private spaces around their beds and desks to retreat from collective living, but I also revealed how these spaces can help build proximity, particularly how the spatial separation they create can facilitate tension management and/or togetherness in dorm living. My research also reveals how domestic issues like light, noise and cleanliness can be drivers of social relationships in dorms. By embedding itself in the HE institutional environment, my thesis discussed how the sense of homemaking and *un*making gained in these students' material practices is associated with their acquisition of social skills and emotional competencies expected by the universities. From this I also suggested that these students' sense of home in their dormitories in their spatial and social life is slightly different from that conceived by universities. My discussions of the materiality of dorm living also involve some special spaces like the balcony, which is also seldom referenced by these existing debates.

To sum up, through a micro lens and a mix of interviews and visual methods, my research has emphasised the complexity of the shared living and social relationships in university accommodation, including their diversity and dynamic and the significance of the institutional and material contexts to the ebbs and flows of these relational and emotional experiences. These points helped advance the sociological debates about HE, shared living and friendships and materiality and built theoretical links to bring these fields of study into conversation. My research also contributed a global perspective based on the Chinese context to the discussions in these fields.

7.3 Implications for Policies and Management

Beyond the academic community, my research can also offer some viewpoints which may help develop the policies and management of Chinese university student residence. Firstly, my findings may remind the staff responsible for policy making and management of college students' dormitories that university students' roommate relationships are complex. As I discussed in Chapter 2, the governmental and university policies on students' roommate relationships in China seem to be dualistic and idealised in general, they display the importance of living and studying together to the cultivation of students' living, social and moral competences, but there may be less consideration of the variety and instability in the practical dorm living. Based on my thesis, roommate relationships in university students' dormitories are multifaceted and dynamic, there are both positive and negative sides in roommate friendships and dorm conflicts may not just result from students' lack of

collectivistic awareness or solidarity. Thus, more than the 'good or bad' or 'collective or individual' assumptions dominant in current policies, my arguments can offer these staff a wider lens to understand college roommate relationships in their policy and management work.

Meanwhile, my findings reflected students' perceptions on their shared dorm living, revealing that how these young people acquire the expected competences and navigate university student residency rules might not always be in the ways assumed by the HE providers. In this sense, my research displayed the importance of students' discourses to the relevant professionals in the government or universities, which may promote their considerations and investigations of students' voices when they make and implement the student accommodation policies.

Moreover, my research can remind the professionals, especially those engaging in dorm designing, that the architectural structure and furnishing of university students' dormitories can also play roles in roommate relationship negotiations. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, these dormitories are widely designed as highly shared residences. My research revealed how students felt about and dealt with this communality. My findings also reflected how this layout caused a range of issues like the noise and light disturbance, bad air and the lack of privacy, which resulted in or intensified roommate tensions. Therefore, by making the relevant professionals pay attention to these issues and providing them with more opinions or feedback on the material design, my research could help improve the material environment of students' dormitories in Chinese universities. Based on my findings, some spatial changes could be possible. For example, more private spaces and spatial separation could be set up; bed curtains could be popularised by universities to support students' control over the public-private boundaries in shared dorm living; the spaces like balconies could also be widespread across university dormitories to make students more flexible between escaping from each other and coming together.

Furthermore, there are some university-organised activities and reforms presented in this thesis, like the Dormitory Cultural Festival, the dorm selection system for students and the construction of independent study rooms. According to Chapter 2, 5 and 6, these actions were thought by the HE providers and students to be effective for intimacy development or tension management in Chinese university dorms. Thus, my findings displayed to the policy and management professionals the importance of continuing, developing and spreading these work. My research also showed them the necessity of increasing flexible and student-oriented regulations on dorm arrangement and roommate assignment.

7.4 Reflections on Research Methods, Reflexivity and Positionality

Research methods

As Chapter 4 details, I used a mix of document analysis, qualitative interviews and visual methods to conduct my research. These qualitative methods together helped me develop a rich, micro exploration of students' interactions and social relationships in the everyday life of Chinese university dormitories. Through analysing the publicly available residential policy documents on universities' official websites and other digital platforms, my research explored how these institutions perceive and show themselves to the external world and bind themselves to broader ruling notions (Brooks and Waters, 2015). In this way my research reflected on how Chinese university dormitories are driven by universities and the educational and ideological purposes of their policies and publicity. The qualitative interviews and visual methods then helped me to explore how young people negotiate their shared living and social relationships in the lifeworld. Drawing on the datasets from website analysis, interviews and visual methods, I obtained multilayered accounts of participants' social, emotional and environmental experiences in the residential arrangement designed by universities. Through these combined datasets, I suggested that students' practical dorm living and interpersonal relationships are usually more complex and nuanced than those presented by universities on their webpages.

The fieldwork focusing on participants' shared dorm living and social relationships in mundane life was conducted through qualitative interviews and visual methods. The visual methods played important roles in prompting the interviews; they helped elicit participants' memories and narratives about the material dorm spaces which may otherwise be ignored (Woodward, 2020); and offered insights into aspects of dorm life, such as emotions, which can be difficult for participants to explicitly express in words (Keats, 2009). However, the visual data were also specifically collected for analysis to reveal the materiality of dorm living and roommate relationships. As shown mainly in Chapter 6, the visual data particularly helped reflect how these interactions and interpersonal relationships in dorm living are shaped by and through the material spaces of dormitories, which then helped address the third research question of my project. The visual methods which I applied consisted of photo elicitations (see for example Harper, 2002) and emotion maps (Gabb, 2008). As discussed in Chapters 4 and 6, participants' explanations of their stories or feelings about certain spaces or things presented in their dorm photos reflected how they share the dorm with their

roommates and their relationships, which further helped generate the key findings, particularly involving personal retreating areas.

The data collected from emotion maps also demonstrated the associations between the social and spatial aspects of dorm living through revealing these young people's emotional experiences in different spaces of their dormitories. As discussed in Chapter 4, the emotion map method was used by Gabb (2008) to illustrate families' emotional exchanges in different household spaces and further to explore family intimacy. I conducted my emotion maps based on similar rationale, but I increased the number of emoticons which could be selected by participants to help express their emotions more precisely. Meanwhile, the emotions expressed in my emotion maps focused on participants' personal emotions and the emotions did not have to directly show emotional exchanges. These new designs advanced the application of emotion maps by demonstrating that people's individual sensory experiences and emotions on material spaces can also indirectly reveal something about their life and relationships and further illustrate the significance of the material environment to social relationships.

The mix of document analysis, interviews and visual methods helped my research reflect students' everyday life and social relationships in Chinese university dormitories and respond to my three research questions. My project also advanced current approaches to research in the field of social relationships in university accommodation in the Chinese context, which has been dominated by quantitative studies to date. The engagement of visual methods particularly ensured participants' active positions and a sense of control in the fieldwork (Heath *et al.*, 2012), which increased their sense of participation and then their motivation to reflect more on their dorm living. Nevertheless, there were also some challenges in the data collection and analysing process. During the fieldwork, plenty of graduate participants were unable to offer dorm photos, thus I provided them with online sample photos as a prompt to help them memorise their dorm spaces. Moreover, multiple datasets are usually needed in research for greater insight, but this can increase the difficulty of managing and integrating different sets of data. This also happened in my research, which analysed the three types of qualitative data with a large number, alongside translation work throughout the data collection and analysis process, which proved challenging - I did much work on coding, explaining and establishing links among these datasets.

Reflexivity and positionality

In Chapter 4, I also discussed issues about reflexivity and positionality, which formed an important part of the methodology of my research. Being reflexive in the data collection and analysis process to reflect on the academic and non-academic issues which influenced the knowledge construction (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003), I found that my research process was mainly impacted by the sensitive research topic and the remote interview method. The research topic focuses on intimate social relationships, which caused avoidance or contradictory accounts of relationship-related narratives in some interviews, particularly where participants had experienced difficult or negative relationships. Meanwhile, I had aimed to go to China to interview people face-to-face and I was hoping to see some of the dorms and do more ethnographic observations, but my fieldwork was finally conducted remotely due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This added challenges for me in terms of gauging participants' emotional expressions or changes during interviews, due to technological issues. Moreover, I could only observe their dorms through the photos and emotion maps they offered. The time difference between China and the UK also influenced the time arrangements of interviews with participants based in China. Although I used strategies like offering emotional reassurance or making the interviews more flexible in terms of time and communication, and this worked in some interviews, these issues still influenced my data generation and analysis.

In addition to issues involving the topic and research techniques, my personal biography also impacted the research process. I did my undergraduate study in China from 2010 to 2014. During the four years of study, I shared a dormitory with five female classmates. We slept in bunk beds and shared desks and shelves. Then I went to the UK and experienced different types of HE life and residences. As argued by Neal and Walters (2006, p. 185), how researchers are perceived by themselves and participants as 'insiders' or 'outsiders' and how their biographical experiences echo and impact the research process can be dynamic and dialectic. Similarly, my biographical experiences and positions played various roles in my project. They formed one of the reasons for my research on this topic and made me an insider when I did the document analysis, interviews and visual investigations. I was familiar with my research background including the website content I analysed. When I designed my interview schedule and visual methods guidelines, my biographical experiences also helped me to set up proper questions and explain the methods of emotion maps and photography in ways my prospective participants could accept. My biographical experiences also helped me build rapport in the recruitment process and during the interviews. Meanwhile, I could understand some special expressions or narratives from my participants also due to similar higher educational backgrounds and dorm living experiences.

However, these pre-existing experiences also made me take some points for granted during the data collection and analysis process. Moreover, some participants' curiosities about my past dorm living experiences also added the risk of straying off-topic during interviews. On the other hand, my identity as researcher made me become the outsider to stay neutral and objective as much as possible in the research process; it helped reduce some of my assumed thinking in data collection and analysis and got the conversations on-track again in some interviews. However, being the outsider also caused some interviews to stray off-topic, due to participants' curiosity about my overseas study and life.

More importantly, my identity as a researcher caused a sense of distance with some participants (Neal and Walters, 2006), which made some of them overcautious about the interview questions. In this sense, highlighting the similarity between my previous dorm living and theirs partly helped me shorten our distances and ease their stress. Thus, my positions as an insider or outsider and how they affected my research process were unfixed and there were even mutual transformations or interplay between these two positions. The intertwining between these two positions also challenged my translation work in the research, due to the constant shifts between English and Chinese in the textual work and conversations throughout the whole research process.

7.5 Limitations and potential for further exploration

Alongside the contributions to current sociological debates, there are also some limitations in this thesis. Firstly, my research only focused on the HEIs that offered degree programmes in China. However, as I mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2, there are other types of HEIs, like higher vocational colleges, which are also important parts of the Chinese HEI system. Different types of HEIs can be different in educational or management aims or approach or even campus culture, which may influence or cause distinctive issues for student dorm living (Yang, 2022; Lin, Li and He, 2023). Thus, there can be future work exploring students' negotiations of their daily life and social relationships in dormitories in other sorts of Chinese HEIs, like higher vocational colleges, and how these are different from the situations in HEIs offering degree programmes.

Meanwhile, as I mentioned previously, my findings did not clearly reflect the structural influences on these young people's shared living in university dormitories. In contrast, my research revealed more about the roles played by the rule-bound institutional contexts and

highly communal material environment. Nevertheless, this may also relate to my sampling, which was not based on the prospective participants' or their roommates' family social status and thus caused no clear difference in family backgrounds among the people in some dorms. Therefore, with specific sampling and recruitment focusing on these young people's family backgrounds, more work can be undertaken to investigate how college dorm living is shaped by the social structure and its relations with the HE massification which facilitated the diversity of students in Chinese universities. There can also be further explorations on the associations between students' genders and their roommate relationships, to sharpen the specific observations of this structural influence on Chinese college students' dorm living. Moreover, these college roommates' family backgrounds which could be further explored can also include their nationality. This research just focused on Chinese home students, but the research lens could be further broadened to the accommodation of overseas students in Chinese universities to probe into this kind of residence and relationships in a more multicultural context.

It is also worth making further explorations into whether and how university roommate relationships are and will be impacted by the end of the 'one-child' policy, due to the increasing number of college students with sibling experience since the policy changed. In this project, most participants did not have a sibling or did not live or grow up with siblings around their ages. In this sense, the experiences of dorm interactions and roommate relationships generated in this research mainly illustrate how the young people with little or no experience of living with siblings tried to manage the shared dorm living. However, the similarities between sibling relationships and college roommate relationships like spatial and household sharing with peers makes it valuable to explore the possible role played by sibling experiences in dorm living experiences. The change of policy offers the chance to explore this issue further. Meanwhile, there can also be an evolution in research approach. For example, longitudinal research on current undergraduates can be conducted in the future to make a more dynamic exploration of their experience through more than one interview at different stages of their university life.

In addition, the impacts of the shared dorm living on students' post-university life also need development in the future. According to the participants' comments, the above competencies or strategies to negotiate social relationships and group living, which they got or developed through the college dorm living, are widely shown to be a kind of impact of their residential experiences on their personal life. Most participants, especially those who graduated, reflected that these social perceptions or skills have become part of their interpersonal

approach in current life. Some graduate participants like Anli referred to their continued friendships with university roommates after graduation, as I mentioned in Chapter 5. Some participants reflected the reduced or lost contact with college roommates. Some participants also mentioned their life in postgraduate dormitories in China, student accommodations in the UK or other types of residences after their undergraduate studies.

Although some narratives about graduate participants' post-university life showed the dynamics of roommate relationships over space and time (Finn, 2015), including various maintenance or changes on friendships as these participants' status in society or personal life were transformed (Brooks, 2002; Spencer and Pahl, 2006), they talked much about the changes of their ages and current studying, working or living situations in their comments. Some participants based in the UK also displayed various living experiences in different sociocultural contexts. These post-university related accounts involve a wider range of knowledge like age, social positions, life-course involvement and sociocultural differences, but there may not be sufficient space in this thesis to explicitly conduct these discussions. Thus, further research is needed to focus on the evolution of college roommate relationships and how this period of shared living impacts people's life after graduation, with engagement of the participants' narratives which I mentioned above and wider theoretical debates.

In terms of students' residences in different countries, as noted in Chapter 3, the residential sharing for college students and relevant studies also exist in other countries like the US (see for example, Carli, Ganley and Pierce-Otay, 1991). Thus, there can be a comparative study between China, the UK or the US on university student accommodation in the future, to develop a broader sociocultural and institutional lens on university student residence research. In relation to temporality, there is also a need for further work about the social significance of memories (see for example, Smart, 2007). In this thesis, apart from the influences of participants' memories of university dorm living, I did not examine much on the connections between participants' living and interpersonal experiences before college and their university roommate relationships either. However, the temporality of personal life and social relationships include not just their fluidity during a period of life-course, but also their associations with the personal experiences before and after this period (see for example Finn, 2015). Thus, the future work on the fluidity of the university dorm living and roommate relationships will also include people's pre-college experiences.

Conclusions

Chapter 7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed the key findings, assessed how I have advanced debates in three sociological areas and reflected on methods and the ways in which my study opens up future research agendas. Based on a sociological qualitative exploration from a relational, spatial and critical lens, I found that how college students negotiate roommate relationships in everyday dorm living in negotiations in Chinese universities is more complex than they are framed or assumed by HE providers and the mainstream research – such negotiations often involve multifaceted and dynamic relationship practices and emotional experience.

Meanwhile, social life in dormitories is not just about individual issues but is associated with various contexts, including the material, institutional and sociocultural environment – and the roles played by these contexts are not necessarily fixed, either. In this sense, university student dormitories and roommate relationships cannot be taken for granted and how young people feel about their shared living cannot be merely explained or judged through a psychological or individualised gaze.

This research contributed new ways of thinking about the research of Chinese college roommate relationships and the sociology of friendship, shared living and higher education. Most importantly, it demonstrated the interplay between shared living environments and higher education in friendship research and the importance of how students' social relationships are negotiated in university accommodation to higher education and shared living studies, based on the Chinese context where there are distinctive institutional and sociocultural criteria and notions around students' life and relationships in college dormitories. My research findings also provided the relevant professionals with the updated knowledge and some suggestions, which may facilitate the improvement of the college student residency policies and management in China.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Interview Schedules (English version)

Interview Schedule (for graduate participants)

1. Warming-up with general information about the participant and his or her roommates (these will be some details related to the demographic sheet)

- At the very beginning, can you briefly introduce yourself?
- I saw that you are from xxx. Did you grow up there and live there until you went to college? Who do you live with at home?
- (For those who have siblings) How old are your siblings? How is your relationship with them?
- Were there more men or women students in your university? How about students' backgrounds?
- What was your degree program about? How do you feel about it?
- How many years have you graduated? Can you briefly tell me your experiences after graduating till now?
- Can you introduce your dormitory and roommates at college? How were you assigned? Are you all around the same age? Were you classmates? How about their family backgrounds? How about your current accommodation and roommates?

2. The material living conditions and the related personal feelings during the college years and their changes at present

A. Materials in dorm photos offered by participants

We will focus on the meanings, participant's feelings and/or relevant stories of certain points in the photos, such as the layout style, decorations or some objects. For those who cannot give me their dormitory photos, I will provide them with online sample dormitory photos as a probe to elicit their memories.

- (Is anything in these photos similar to that in your dormitory?)
- How did you get it/them?
- How did you use it/them in your daily life?
- Do you think it/they influenced your roommate relationships? Why?

B. Physical spaces with personal feelings on the emotion maps

We will focus on participant's narrative of the interactions and emotions shown on the map and their relation to the physical spaces they occurred.

- Can you explain your map? What happened in this area? Why did you have this feeling?
- Do you think it influenced your roommate relationships? Why? (or other follow-up questions related to the narrative)

C. Changes of residential conditions

- Has anything changed in your current living condition? (Including different university dormitories and British accommodations if the participant mention)
- How do you feel about it?

D. Perceptions and experiences on public-private boundary and sharing

- How did you feel about sharing and what had you experienced when you were an undergraduate?
- Was there any public-private boundary in your dormitory? How did you treat the communal and personal spaces and stuff? How do you feel about that situation?
- Is there any difference in your feelings about sharing now? How do you feel about it?

3. Everyday life and interpersonal relationships in university dormitory and their changes in current life

A. Everyday life and interactions

- How much time did you usually spend in your dormitory? Why? How about your roommates?
- Did you interact much with each other in daily life? How and usually in what cases?
- Apart from daily interactions (or events described before), do you remember other moments you were together (not necessarily inside the dormitory) and your feelings? If so, can you tell me a little bit?
- (For participants who still have roommates/flatmates/housemates now) How about your interactions with your current roommates/flatmates/housemates? Anything different? Why?

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- How have you felt about your interactions with 'the only child'? How about those who have siblings? Anything different?
- Was there any rule on your dormitory living made by the university? Did it/them influence your roommate relationships? How do you feel about it/them?
- Did you make your own dormitory rules? How was it/were they going? Did it/them influence your roommate relationships? How do you feel about it/them?

B. Management of roommate relationships and their evolvement overtime

- Did you make friends with any of your roommates? How did you become friends?
- Did you meet with any problem when getting along with your roommates? How did it turn out? Did it influence your relationships?
- Do you still keep in touch with any of your college roommates now? Do you miss them?
- (For participants who still have roommates/flatmates/housemates now) How about your roommate relationships now? Anything changed? Why?
- How much do you think your college roommate relationships have influenced your life and interpersonal relationships after graduation till now? Have you learned anything or formed any habit through your dormitory living in college years?

4. (For those who reside in student accommodations in the UK) Comparison of living experience in student accommodation between the UK and China

- Can you generally compare your living experience in student accommodations between the two countries? These could include living conditions, atmosphere and roommate relationships etc. How do you feel about these differences or similarities?

Interview Schedule (for undergraduate participants)

1. Warming-up with general information about the participant and his or her roommates (these will be some details related to the demographic sheet)

- At the very beginning, can you briefly introduce yourself?
- I saw that you come from xxx. Did you grow up there and live there until you went to college? Who do you live with at home?
- (For those who have siblings) How old are your siblings? How is your relationship with

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your sibling(s)?

- Are there more men or women students in your university? How about students' background?
- What is your degree program about? How do you feel about it?
- Can you introduce your dormitory and roommates? How were you assigned? How long have you been roommates? Are you all around the same age? Are you classmates? How about their family background?

2. The associations between roommate relationships and the material spaces and objects in the dormitory

A. Materials in dorm photos offered by participants

We will focus on the meanings, participant's feelings and/or relevant stories of certain points in the photos, such as the layout style, decorations or some objects. For those who cannot give me their dormitory photos, I will provide them with online sample dormitory photos to remind them of their own dorms.

- How did you get it/them?
- How do you use it/them in your daily life?
- Do you think it/they influenced your roommate relationships? Why?

B. Physical spaces with personal feelings on the emotion maps

We will focus on participant's narrative of the interactions and the related emotions shown on the map and their relation to the physical spaces they occurred.

- Can you explain your map? What happened in this area? Why did you have this feeling?
- How often does it happen? Do you think it influenced your roommate relationships? Why? (or other follow-up questions related to the narrative)

C. Changes of residential conditions

- (For those who have changed dorms during college years) Has anything changed about the living conditions in your current dorm?
- How do you feel about it?

D. Participant's perceptions and experiences on public-private boundary and sharing

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- How do you feel about sharing and what have been your experiences?
- Is there any public-private boundary in your dormitory? How do you treat the communal and personal spaces and stuff? How about the situation now?
- Do you share your personal belongings or spaces with your roommates? Why and how do you do it?

3. Everyday life and roommate relationship negotiations in the dormitory

A. Everyday life and interactions

- How much time do you usually spend in your dormitory? Why? How about your roommates?
- Do you interact much with each other in daily life? How and usually in what cases?
- Apart from daily interactions (or events described before), can you tell me a little bit about other moments you were together (not necessarily inside the dormitory) and your feelings?
- How do you feel about your interactions with 'the only child'? How about those who have siblings? Anything different?
- (For those who have changed dorms during college years) How about your interactions with your current roommates? Anything different? Why?
- Is there any rule on your dormitory living made by the university? Is there any influence on your roommate relationships? How do you feel about it/them?
- Did you make your own dormitory rules? How is it/are they going? Is there any influence on your roommate relationships? How do you feel about it/them?

C. Management of roommate relationships and their evolvement overtime

- How did you feel about your roommates when you first met them? Is there any change by now on your feelings? Why?
- What are your ideal roommate relationships? Do you think your roommate relationships now are ideal for you? Why?
- Have you made friends with any of your roommates? How did you become friends?
- Have you ever had any problem when getting along with your roommates? How did it turn out? Did it influence your relationships?
- Any hope of these roommate relationships in the future?
- (For the participants under the final year) Have you learned anything or formed any habit through your dormitory living in college years?

Appendix 2: Participant information sheet (for both graduate and undergraduate participants, English version)

Participant Information Sheet

Roommate relationships in Chinese university dormitories: students' life experience and perception

You are being invited to participate in this research project. Before you decide to do so, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information and decide whether to take part in this project. Thank you for reading.

Research purpose

This project is a PhD research project based at the University of Sheffield. It will investigate students' social relationships while living in Chinese university dormitories. This is a topic in which there is a growing interest due to both the conflicts and friendships that can develop through young people's experience of shared living on college campuses. Apart from developing academic understanding of shared residential living and higher education, more importantly, this project will help you think and talk about your experience on dormitory living and roommate relationships in creative ways and from new perspectives. Besides, it may also give other scholars or professionals related to Chinese universities a new insight into dormitories and students' personal relationships on campus.

Information about participation

1. Do you have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in this research and how many tasks to complete. If you do decide to take part you will be able to keep a copy of this information sheet, besides, you should also indicate your agreement on the consent form (in Chinese or English), sign your name and keep a copy of it. You still have the right to withdraw at any time without any reason during your participation in the interviews or related activities. If you take part in all the activities below, then you may get a voucher valued at ¥10 (or £10) in the end if you want.

2. What will happen to you if you take part?

The research activities include a 1-hour interview about your experiences and feelings of your roommate relationships in everyday life. The interview is expected to be face-to-face, but it could also be taken online if you want. You will also be invited to take or prepare one or more photos about the inside of your own dormitory. Please make sure no person will be in any photo. Moreover, you will also be invited to draw a simple emotion map of your dormitory space. It would be great if you could show me the photos and emotion maps around a week prior to the interview, then we could start the interview by discussing them. However, you could also do these during the interview as you like. All these sections will be completed in Chinese. The interview will be audio recorded under your permission and the record will be destroyed once the accuracy of transcriptions is confirmed.

If you would like to take part in this research, I will offer you more explicit explanations of the activities about your photos and emotion maps. We will also talk about the details of your participation in advance, such as time, place, way of contact and anti-Covid measures. At the end of my PhD study, I would share my research findings with you if you want.

3. Will your personal information in this project be kept confidential?

In this research, some of your personal data may be collected, including your real name, age, gender, major, year of study, and the basic information of your university. This information will be kept strictly confidential. All data will be completely anonymised. Your name including your WeChat name, the name of your university and the names of people you mention in the interview will all be changed to aliases assigned randomly or you can also decide one by yourself.

Any of your data collected as part of the research will be managed in line with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the UK Data Protection Act 2018 and the Common Law Duty of Confidentiality. Transcriptions and other analyses will be carried out in a private space and data files at each stage will only be accessed by me and my supervisors. All the electronic files with data will be stored securely on the University of Sheffield's VPN and password protected electronic storage space and all these files will be encrypted. All the paper-based documents with data will also be securely stored in a locked space on campus in the University of Sheffield while all the consent forms will be stored separately in a locked cabinet on campus. Your personal data will be stored securely for three years after publication, then all relevant electronic files will be deleted, and all the paper documents will

also be shredded.

4. What are the possible risks of taking part?

There is no risk nor harm related to this research. However, because this project will address the questions of personal relationships in everyday life, so it may involve discussing both positive and difficult living experiences and relationships, this may negatively influence your emotions. Although I have paid attention to this issue and tried my best to make this research more careful and sensitively orientated, I have to inform you of this potential risk. Meanwhile, the Covid-19 situation may also cause a kind of risk in the face-to-face interviews. However, I will take measures to guarantee your well-being during the face-to-face interview, according to the up-to-date Government anti-pandemic rules in China, these will include making the interview outdoors or in a well aerated room, wearing face masks, sanitising hands and keeping space of at least 1 metre. Before the interview, we will also confirm that our health conditions are both at a low risk of Covid. More details about anti-pandemic information will be offered to you during our further contact. During the participation, you have the right to withdraw once you feel uncomfortable with this research or if you still worry about the risk of Covid-19. You can also choose a remote interview if you cannot accept the face-to-face one. If you do need help in terms of your well-being related to this research, I can help you contact the health services of your universities or the local hospital (please see the end of this sheet for contact details).

More information about this project

This project is self-funded. It has been approved by the ethics committee of the Department of Sociological Studies and the University Research Ethics Committee of the University of Sheffield. Should you have any question or complaint about this research, please do not hesitate to contact me. However, if you feel your questions or complaints have not been handled to your satisfaction, then you can contact my supervisors or the Head of Department. The contact details are as follow:

The researcher:

Guanyi Xu (PhD student of the Department of Sociological Studies, The University of Sheffield)

Email: gxu12@sheffield.ac.uk

WeChat: xiaomu104

Supervisors:

Doctor Katherine Davies

Email: k.davies@sheffield.ac.uk

Telephone: 01142226479

Professor Sarah Neal

Email: s.neal@sheffield.ac.uk

Telephone: 01142226424

Head of the Department of Sociological Studies, The University of Sheffield:

Professor Nathan Hughes

Email: nathan.hughes@sheffield.ac.uk

Thank you for your participation!

Appendix 3: Consent forms (English version)**Roommate relationships in Chinese university dormitories: students' life experience and perception****Consent form 1**

<i>Please tick the appropriate boxes</i>	Yes	No
Taking Part in the Project		
I have read and understood the project information sheet dated [insert date]. (If you will answer No to this question, please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to show my dormitory photos to the researcher in this research.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to draw an emotion map of my dormitory and show it to the researcher in this research.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that there will be anti-Covid measures during the face-to-face interview in this research and I agree to be interviewed in a face-to-face way.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that I can be interviewed remotely and do not have to participate face-to-face.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time before the findings being published; I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part and there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
How my information will be used during and after the project		
I understand my personal details such as name, phone number, WeChat number, address and email address etc. will not be revealed to people outside the project.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand and agree that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that I will not be named in these outputs.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand and agree that my dormitory photos may be cited in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that all the related data and names will be anonymized. I also understand that no one will be shown up in any photo.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand and agree that my emotion map may be cited in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that all the related data and names will be anonymized.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers will have	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.		
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers may use my data in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers		
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Name of participant	Signature	Date
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date
徐冠一 (Guanyi Xu)		

Project contact details for further information:

Researcher: Guanyi Xu
Email: gxu12@sheffield.ac.uk
WeChat: xiaomu104

Supervisors:
Doctor Katherine Davies
Email: k.davies@sheffield.ac.uk
Telephone: 0114 222 6479

Professor Sarah Neal
Email: s.neal@sheffield.ac.uk
Telephone: 0114 222 6424

If you have any complaint about this research, please contact the Head of Department:
Professor Nathan Hughes
Email: nathan.hughes@sheffield.ac.uk

Roommate relationships in Chinese university dormitories: students' life experience and perception

Consent form 2

(for dormitory photos)

<i>Please tick the appropriate boxes</i>	Yes	No
Taking Part in the Project		
I understand and agree that my dormitory photo 1 will be cited in publications, reports, web pages, presentations and other research outputs.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand and agree that my dormitory photo 2 will be cited in publications, reports, web pages, presentations and other research outputs.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand and agree that my dormitory photo 3 will be cited in publications, reports, web pages, presentations and other research outputs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Name of participant	Signature	Date
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date
徐冠一 (Guanyi Xu)		

Project contact details for further information:

Researcher: Guanyi Xu
Email: gxu12@sheffield.ac.uk
WeChat: xiaomu104

Supervisors:
Doctor Katherine Davies
Email: k.davies@sheffield.ac.uk
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Professor Sarah Neal
Email: s.neal@sheffield.ac.uk
Telephone: 0114 222 6424

**If you have any complaint about this research, please contact the Head of Department:
Professor Nathan Hughes
Email: nathan.hughes@sheffield.ac.uk**

Appendix 4: Approval Letter of Ethic Application



Downloaded: 15/11/2020

Approved: 28/10/2020

Guanyi Xu
Registration number: 190218641
Sociological Studies
Programme: Sociological Studies (PhD/Sociology FT) - SCSR31

Dear Guanyi

PROJECT TITLE: Roommate relationships in Chinese university dormitories: students life experience and perception
APPLICATION: Reference Number 035688

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 28/10/2020 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 035688 (form submission date: 14/10/2020); (expected project end date: 31/08/2023).
- Participant information sheet 1081231 version 5 (14/10/2020).
- Participant information sheet 1081230 version 4 (05/10/2020).
- Participant consent form 1082304 version 1 (24/08/2020).
- Participant consent form 1081232 version 3 (05/10/2020).

If during the course of the project you need to [deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation](#) please inform me since written approval will be required.

Your responsibilities in delivering this research project are set out at the end of this letter.

Yours sincerely

Jennifer Adams
Ethics Administrator
Sociological Studies

Please note the following responsibilities of the researcher in delivering the research project:

- The project must abide by the University's Research Ethics Policy: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure>
- The project must abide by the University's Good Research & Innovation Practices Policy: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.6710661/file/GRIIPPolicy.pdf
- The researcher must inform their supervisor (in the case of a student) or Ethics Administrator (in the case of a member of staff) of any significant changes to the project or the approved documentation.
- The researcher must comply with the requirements of the law and relevant guidelines relating to security and confidentiality of personal data.
- The researcher is responsible for effectively managing the data collected both during and after the end of the project in line with best practice, and any relevant legislative, regulatory or contractual requirements.

Appendix 5: Participant Demographic Sheets (English version)**Demographic Sheet
(for graduate participants)**

Name	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	University	Major	Current job	Current location

1. Were you a local student in your college years?
 Yes No (you were from:)
2. Were you from:
 City Town Village
3. What was your registered permanent residence (Hukou)?
 Agricultural Non-agricultural
4. What did your parents do? (you can tick more than one box)
 Not in paid work Manual employment self-employment Professional employment
5. What are your parents' educational background? (you can tick more than one box)
 No educational qualification School qualifications Vocational/professional qualifications University qualifications
6. Were you the "only child" of your parents?
 Yes (skip to question 8) No (who and how old were your siblings:)
7. Did you share a bedroom with your siblings?
 Yes No
8. Did you ever live in the dormitory before college?
 Yes (why and how long:) No
9. How many people were there in your dormitory at college?
10. Who do you live with now?
 Roommates/housemates/flatmates Family Living alone

**Demographic Sheet
(for undergraduate participants)**

Name	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	University	Major	Year of study

1. Are you a local student?
 Yes No (you are from:)

2. Are you from:
 City Town Village

3. What's your registered permanent residence (Hukou)?
 Agricultural Non-agricultural

4. What do your parents do? (you can tick more than one box)
 Not in paid work Manual employment self-employment Professional employment

5. What are your parents' educational background? (you can tick more than one box)
 No educational qualification School qualifications Vocational/professional qualifications University qualifications

6. Are you the "only child" of your parents?
 Yes (skip to question 8) No (who and how old are your siblings:)

7. Do you share a bedroom with your siblings?
 Yes No

8. Did you ever live in the dormitory before college?
 Yes (why and how long:) No

9. How many people are there in your dormitory?

Appendix 6: Participants' Profiles

Name (pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	The year of graduation and subsequent experiences	Current job	Current location	Local student or not during undergraduate years	Rural or urban	Registered permanent residence	Parents' work	Parents' educational background	Only child' or not; whether sharing a bedroom	Having dorm experience before college or not
Minglian Nie	25	Male	Han	Minglian graduated in 2017, then he worked for a period of time and then went to Sheffield for postgraduate study till now.	Postgraduate student	Sheffield	No, from Suqian, Jiangsu province	Urban	Non-agricultural	Professional employment	Vocational/professional qualification	Only child	No, lived with parents at home
Chen Jiang	25	Male	Mongolian	Chen graduated in 2017. He taught in a local educational institution from the final year of his undergraduate study till the Spring Festival in 2018. Then he went to the UK on July 2018 to start his postgraduate study in Sheffield. From April 2019, he started his internship in a hotel in Birmingham. The he worked in a supermarket from October till the outbreak of the pandemic. Now he just started his postgraduate study for a second-degree.	Postgraduate student	Sheffield	Yes	Urban	Non-agricultural	Professional employment	University qualification; vocational/professional qualification	Only child	Yes, Chen completed his 6-year high school study in boarding schools.
Feng Wu	31	Male	Han	Feng graduated in 2012. The he went to the UK for postgraduate study in Newcastle. He started studying for his doctorate in 2014 in London, but his programme is a cooperative project between the university and a company, so he actually stayed in the company in Cambridge during his study. Now he has got a doctoral degree and works for his company.	Structural integrity engineer	Cambridge	Yes	Urban	Non-agricultural	Professional employment	Vocational/professional qualification	Only child	No
Anli Li	26	Female	Han	Anli graduated in 2016. Then she completed her postgraduate study in Xi'an and got a Master's degree. Afterwards, she went to London to study for a doctoral degree, supported by a company in Cambridge.	PhD student	Cambridge	No, from Bozhou, Anhui province	Urban	Non-agricultural	Professional employment	University qualification	Only child	No
Lin Jin	31	Male	Han	Lin graduated in 2012. Then he went to the UK for the postgraduate study and then studied for a doctoral degree in Birmingham. He started working after getting the doctorate. Recently he just resigned.	No work, just resigned	London	No, from Yingkou, Liaoning province	Urban	Non-agricultural	self-employment	School qualification	One older brother (14 years older) and one older sister (10 years older), but each of them has a private bedroom	Yes. When Lin was in junior high school, he had lived in a dorm for 3 to 4 days during a spring outing organized by the school.
Yanli Jiang	30	Female	Han	Yanli graduated in 2012. Then she completed the 3-year postgraduate study in the same university and then went to the UK for doctoral study in London. Now she is writing her dissertation and on the other hand working in Cambridge.	Project leader	Huddersfield	Yes	Urban	Non-agricultural	Professional employment	Vocational/professional qualification	Only child	No
Yang Yang	23	Female	Han	Yang graduated in 2019. Then she started the postgraduate programme in Sheffield after completing the preparatory course.	Postgraduate student	Sheffield	Yes	Urban	Non-agricultural	Professional employment	University qualification	Only child	No
Mei Hu	23	Female	Han	Mei graduated in 2020. Then she started the postgraduate programme in Sheffield.	Postgraduate student	Sheffield	No, from Lanzhou, Gansu Province	Urban	Non-agricultural	Professional employment	University qualification	One younger brother (14 years younger), but each of them has a private bedroom	No

Graduate participants basing in the UK – general demographic information

Roommate Relationships in Chinese University Dormitories: Students' Life Experience and Perception

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Name(pseudonym)	Location of University	Major	Introduction of the university and the major	Introduction of the college dorm
Minglian Nie	Nanjing, Jiangsu province	Packaging Engineering	It is a provincial key university. According to Minglian's introduction, during his college years, there were a bit more female than male students in the university and his major. Most students were from Jiangsu province. All the students in his major were from Jiangsu and most of them were from the north where are usually thought to be poorer than the south. Students were quite diversified in terms of other backgrounds. The major was not his first choice, he didn't quite like it and felt that the major was a bit difficult. Just a few students in his university really liked studying.	The dorm was allocated according to students' registration number. There were 4 students in the dorm, all of them were classmates and all are around the same age. All of them are urban students and from Jiangsu. All of them are in the same ethnicity and there was no big difference between them on other backgrounds.
Chen Jiang	Shenyang, Liaoning province	Logistics Management	It is an ordinary university. According to Chen's introduction, during his college years, there were more female than male students in the university (about 7.3 or 6.4) and his major (70 out of 110 were female). The students were diversified, but the students from Liaoning or northeastern China took up a bit larger proportion.	The dorm was allocated by the university. There were 6 students in the dorm, they were all in the same major and all are around the same age. Their parents are all in paid work. Although one of them is rural student, his family is not poor at all. All of them come from Liaoning in northern China except one who is from Jiangxi province in the south. Chen is Mongolian but others are Han. There is no big difference between them on other backgrounds. They were all outgoing and good at study.
Feng Wu	Chongqing	Oil and Gas Transportation Engineering	It is an ordinary university. According to Feng's introduction, during his college years, there were more male than female students in the university and his major (around 3:1). Most students in his major come from Chongqing and Sichuan province (near Chongqing) and student parents mainly work in oil fields and relevant institutions. Almost all the urban students in his major has this background and thus come from well-to-do family. But most rural students do not have this background and their family are relatively poorer. In his class, 1/4 to 1/3 of the students come from rural area.	Feng changed dorms twice in his college years, due to the requirement of university and the tutor. The first two dorms were allocated by the university but the final one was his own choice. There were 4, 3 and 6 people in the three dorms respectively. So the roommates he had lived with were diversified. He had roommates from northern, southern and western China (Chongqing, Beijing, Xi'an, Gansu, Henan and Guangxi), these roommates include both rural and urban students and one person is from Zhuang ethnic group. But they are all around the same age and in the same major.
Anli Li	Maanshan, Anhui province	Metallurgical Engineering	It is a provincial key university. According to Anli's introduction, during her college years, most students in her major were men. There were about 100 students in her major but no more than 20 girls. As far as she knew, the students from Anhui province were a little bit more but almost all of them are from other places of the province. It seemed that there were a bit more rural students.	Anli changed dorms once, due to the change of campus. There were 6 people in the first dorm and 4 in the second dorm, but there was no new roommates for her, because it was just a reduction of 2 roommates. All of them are around the same age and in the same ethnicity. Anli's roommates come from Anhui and Xinjiang respectively. One girl from Anhui is a rural student, but their family are all around the same, not too rich nor too poor. The Xinjiang girl and Anli are both the 'only child' of the family and the other two roommates in the 4-people dorm have an older and a younger brother respectively. All of them were in the same major.
Lin Jin	Anshan, Liaoning province	Metallurgical Engineering	It is a provincial key university. According to Lin's introduction, during his college years, there were more male than female students in his university and the students in his class were quite diversified in terms of the backgrounds. Lin was a hard-working student, which is different from most of his classmates.	Lin changed dorm once, due to the requirement of the university or the department. There were 6 people in the first dorm and 4 in the second one. All the people in the first dorm were classmates, those in the second dorm belonged to two classes but in the same major. Lin has already known the new roommates of the second dorm. During the college years, Lin had lived with roommates from northeastern, southern and western China (Liaoning, Jiling, Anhui and Qinghai), these roommates include both rural and urban students. They are all around the same age and in the same ethnicity. There are some differences among them in personality and regional habits and Lin did better on study than his roommates, but Lin does not think that these influenced their relationships.
Yanli Jiang	Qingdao, Shandong province	Mechanical Design and Manufacture and Automation	It is a provincial key university. According to Yanli's introduction, during her college years, there were much more male than female students in her major (8 out of 108 were female). There were more rural students than urban students in her class and more than half of the students in the university were from Shandong province but most of them were from the places other than Qingdao. Yanli felt that the courses of her major are very difficult. She guesses that it may be difficult to most female student. She felt that the academic atmosphere of this major is quite good, many students were quite hardworking.	The dorm was allocated by the university. There were 4 students in the dorm, they were all in the same major and all are around the same age. Three of them are from Shandong in northern China and one is from Guizhou in the south. Two students are from rural areas, but there was no big gap between them and urban students in family economic status and the girl from Guizhou even looked better than others. All of them are Han except the Guizhou girl whose mother is from Miao ethnic group. They are quite similar in the schedule, due to the same major.
Yang Yang	Chongqing	International Accounting	It is a provincial key university. According to Yang's introduction, during her college years, there were more male than female students in her university but the situation in her major was the opposite. As far as she knew, local students took up a bit larger proportion in both the university and her major. She also felt that most students are just like her who come from ordinary family which is not too rich nor too poor. Yang's major is a good major in the university and even the Southwestern China, thus many students in her major did very well in study and most students were hardworking.	There were 4 people in the dorm and all of them were classmates. The dorms were assigned according to the criterion that there must be both local students and those from other places in each dorm. So, the other three people in Yang's dorm are from Anhui, Hebei and Chongqing respectively. They are all around the same age and they are all Han. They all come from urban area. The girl from Anhui comes from a family of officers and the economic status of her family seemed to be a bit better than that of other three girls. But Yang mentioned that none of them was poor. Although some of them like staying up late, while others like going to bed early, Yang does not think that this caused any problem on their relationships, because they tried to avoid bringing inconvenience to others' daily life.
Mei Hu	Shanghai	Information Management and Information System	It is an ordinary university. According to Mei's introduction, during her college years, there were a bit more male than female students in her university but the situation seemed to be opposite in her major. Mei's major belongs to a chino-foreign cooperative educational programme, so the tuition fees are higher than those of many other majors. Thus she felt that even if not all the students in her major were rich, they were at least not poor. As far as she knew, there were more local students in the university and students from southern and eastern China also occupied a large proportion. Although studying and living in Chinese university, the students in Mei's major should take modules of both Shanghai Ocean University and University of Tasmania and all these modules had high requirements on their academic performance, so most students were hard-working and Mei was busy with her study.	There were 4 people in the dorm and all of them were classmates. There seemed to be at least one local student in every dorm. Mei guesses that it may be related to dorm assignment criterion and the large number of local students. The other three people in Yang's dorm are from Qingdao, Shanghai and Sichuan respectively. They are all around the same age and they are all Han. The economic status of their family were similar. The Qingdao's girl's family might be a bit richer than other people, but Mei said that it wasn't shown in the daily life, she knew this is just because she had a very good relationship with that girl and thus knew more about her. They also had similar habits and they were all easygoing and all did well in study. Although the dorms were assigned randomly, students were noticed of the assignment results before the registration day, so they had already know each other and talked online before they moved into dorm.

Graduate participants basing in the UK – information about their undergraduate universities and dormitories

Appendices

Name(pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Rural or urban	Registered permanent residence	Parents' work	Parents' educational background	'Only child' or not; whether sharing a bedroom	Having dorm experience before college or not
Mo Yu	21	female	Han	Rural	Agricultural	Mother: not in paid-work; Father: self-employment	School qualifications	One older sister(5 years older). They shared a bedroom until Mo was 16.	Yes. Mo completed her 3-year senior high school study in a boarding school where she lived in a 6-people dorm.
Wei Song	21	Male	Han	Urban	Non-agricultural	Mother: professional employment before retirement; father: self-employment	School qualifications	One older sister(6 years older). They have never shared a bedroom.	No
Huan Lan	22	Male	Mongolian	Urban	Non-agricultural	Professional employment	Mother: vocational/professional qualifications; father: university qualifications	Yes	Yes. Huan studied and lived in boarding schools from the second year of junior high school to the end of senior high school years(about 5 years). He had lived in 4-people, 6-people and 8 people during the high school years. Before starting the college courses, Huan completed a 1-year preparatory course. During this time, he lived in a dorm in another university with other 3 students from his university. They are in different majors but got along well and keep in touch till now.
Jun Tian	18	Male	Han	Urban	Non-agricultural	Professional employment	Mother: vocational/professional qualifications; father: university qualifications	One twin sister. They have never shared a bedroom.	No
Ying Zhang	18	Male	Han	Urban	Non-agricultural	Professional employment(his mother has retired)	Mother: school qualifications; father: university qualifications	One older sister(10 years older). They have never shared a bedroom.	Yes. Ying studied and lived in boarding schools from the third year of junior high school to the end of senior high school years(about 4 years). He had lived in 4-people, 6-people and 8 people during the high school years. Before starting the college courses, Huan completed a 1-year preparatory course. During this time, he lived in a dorm in another university with other 3 students from his university. They are in different majors but got along well and keep in touch till now.
Yoyo Deng	20	Female	Han	Rural. In fact, Yoyo grew up in the city. But her permanent residence is registered as "Agricultural".	Agricultural	Self-employment	School qualifications	One older brother(2 years older). They have never shared a bedroom.	Yes. Yoyo had studied in another university in 2019 and lived in a university dorm for 1 year. Then she dropped out of that university and participated in the College Entrance Examination again and was finally enrolled by the current university.
Yuanda Wen	19	Male	Han	Rural	Non-agricultural	Self-employment	School qualifications	Yes	Yes. Yuanda studied and lived in a boarding school throughout the senior high school years(3 years).
Mingyu Wang	20	Male	Han	Urban	Non-agricultural	Professional employment	School qualifications	Yes	Yes. Mingyu had lived in a dorm with other 6 people for 2 weeks in the final year of high school, for the convenience of going to school. But there are big differences in lifestyles between his roommates and him, which brought inconvenience to him. So he stopped the dorm living and rented a house with his parents near the school.
Wanyin Cao	21	Female	Han	Urban	Non-agricultural	Self-employment	Mother: school qualification; father: university qualification	Yes	Yes. Wanyin studied and lived in boarding schools throughout the high school years(6 years)
Yingying Tang	20	Female	Han	Urban	Non-agricultural	Professional employment	Mother: vocational qualification; father: university qualification	Yes	Yes. Yingying studied and lived in boarding schools throughout the high school years(6 years)
Zhen Ye	20	Male	Han	Urban	Non-agricultural	Professional employment	University qualifications	One younger sister(5 years younger). They just shared a bedroom for about one year when they were very young.	Yes. Zhen voluntarily lived in the school dorm throughout the whole high school years(6 years), due to the long distance between the schools and his home. He usually lived with 7 people but he had also lived with 19 people for half a semester.
Bing Gu	20	Female	Han	Rural	Agricultural	Mother: manual employment; father: not in paid work	School qualifications	Two younger sisters(2 years and 9 years younger respectively) and one younger brother(7 years younger). Bing has been sharing a bedroom with her sisters until now.	Yes. Bing studied and Bingved in a boarding school in the junior high school years(3 years) and then she voluntarily Bingved in the school dorm in the senior high school years(3 years), due to long distance between the school and her home. The Bingving conditions in her high school dorms are not as good as those in her university dorm. On the other hand, she shared the dorm with more people in high school than she does in the university.
Yi Su	19	Male	Han	Rural. In fact, Yi grew up in the city. But his permanent residence is registered as "Agricultural".	Agricultural	Self-employment	School qualifications	One younger sister(8 years younger). They have never shared a bedroom.	Yes. Yi started being a boarding student since primary school(about 12 years), because the schools he went to are all located in another city. Those dorms are similar to the university one in design. But there were 10 students in the senior high dorm, which are obviously more than the students in the current college dorm.
Yongming Liu	21	Male	Han	Rural	Agricultural	Manual employment	School qualifications	One older brother(10 years older). They have never shared a bedroom.	Yes. Yongming started being a boarding student since the third year of primary school(about 10 years), due to the long distance between the schools and his home.

Current undergraduate participants – general demographic information

Roommate Relationships in Chinese University Dormitories: Students' Life Experience and Perception

Appendices

Name(pseudonym)	Location of University	Major	Introduction of the university and the major	Year of study	Local student or not	Introduction of the dorm
Mo Yu	Shanghai	Translation	It is an ordinary university. According to Mo's introduction, there were more male than female students in the university (about 7:3) but the situation in her major was opposite (9:1). As far as she knows, most students in her class are from Shanghai and the neighboring two provinces (Jiangsu and Zhejiang). Mo is not quite clear about other backgrounds of her classmates or the students in the university, she thinks that those are personal information which she usually doesn't ask about and thus knows less about. She feels that the students in her class are not very hardworking, but quite insightful. She likes her major and feels that the study is easy.	The 3rd year	No, from Quanzhou, Fujian Province	The dorm was allocated according to students' registration number. There are 4 students in the dorm, all of them are at the same age and in the same ethnicity. They were classmates at the beginning, but one of them then changed her major to fashion design. One of them is also from Quanzhou and the other two are from Guangdong province and Jiangsu Province respectively. In general, they are from southern and eastern China. All of them like staying up late at night and all of them are a bit introverted but can always talk a lot with each other. As for study, Mo is more hard working than her roommates but she is not very clear about their academic performance, because she seldom asks about their exam results. Mo also knows less about their other backgrounds, she just guesses that they might all come from urban areas.
Wei Song	Shanghai	Mechanical Engineering	It is an ordinary university. According to Wei's introduction, there are more male than female students in both the university and his major. Wei is the monitor of his class who often helps the teacher collect the students' demographic information, so he knows relatively more about students' background. There are 43 students in his class but just 5 are female. 20% of the students are from rural areas, but they are not necessarily poor. Wei feels that most students in his class are similar with him who lived with parents before the college years. As far as he knows, the parents of most students in his class may be professionally employed, while some may be self-employed. Very few students in his department come from very rich and powerful family, he guesses that it might also be because that some students from that kind of family do not show off the wealth and power. The students from poor family are also few in number (around 10% to 15%). Most students should be from well-off family. Nearly half or a quarter of students are local students in almost every class. Wei feels that the study is a bit complicated which makes him a little tired, although he had a lot of expectation on this major at the beginning of the college study. He is going to apply for a postgraduate position in this year but may choose another major. The students in Wei's department are generally hard-working, due to the fierce competition.	The 3rd year	No, from Yinchuan, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region	The dorm was allocated according to the region where students come from. Wei said that this criterion changes every year. In some years, the dorm was allocated according to students' surname. None of the 4 people in Wei's dorm are local student. Wei's roommates come from Henan in central China and Jiangxi in southern China respectively, while Wei comes from northwestern China. They are around the same age and in the same ethnicity and they are classmates. Compared to other three boys, Wei care more about the cleanliness of the dorm.
Huan Lan	Hefei, Anhui Province	Polymer Material and Engineering	It is a key university directly under the Ministry of Education. It is also a 211 Project university. According to Huan's introduction, there are more male than female students in both the university and his major (about 3:1 in his department). As far as he knows, most students in his class come from the family which is not too rich nor too poor. As a university directly under the Ministry, this university usually enrolls more students from other provinces than Anhui, which is different from the provincial universities. So, there are fewer Anhui students (around 1/4 to 1/3) in this university. Almost all the students in Huan's department plan to apply for a postgraduate position after graduation, so they are very hard-working. Nearly 40% of the students in his major are even interested in assisting the teachers or postgraduate students in their research projects. However, Huan is a bit different, because he wants to work in trade and market after graduation.	The 3rd year	No, from Chengdu, Sichuan Province	There are 4 students in the dorm, they are classmates and at the same age. They changed the dorm at the beginning of the third year, due to the requirement of the university, but they are still roommates. The new dorm is almost the same as the old one in design, except that the old one has an en-suite toilet but the new one doesn't. The other three boys are Han in ethnicity. One of them is from Hefei and the other two are from Jilin Province in northeastern China and Ningxia in the northwest, respectively. They are different in personality and academic performance and Huan is also different from the other three in terms of the daily schedule, lifestyle, future plan, hobbies and the attitude towards teamwork. However, Huan does not think these differences influenced much on their personal relationships and he feels that they get along well in general. In terms of the economic conditions, Huan doesn't find much difference among them 4.
Jun Tian	Hefei, Anhui Province	Enginery (Intelligent Manufacturing)	It is a key university directly under the Ministry of Education. It is also a 211 Project university. According to Jun's introduction, there are more male than female students in both the university and his major (about 10:1 in his major). As far as he knows, the students in his class mainly come from other provinces than Anhui (about 8:1) and most of them should be from urban areas and the family which is not too rich nor too poor. The students are hardworking in general, and the competitions are fierce.	The 1st year	No, from Fuyang, Anhui Province	There are 6 students in the dorm, they are classmates with the same age and ethnicity. They are all from urban middle class family. However, only Jun comes from Anhui, his roommates come from Shanxi, Hebei, Heilongjiang, Guangzhou and Ningxia respectively. Generally speaking, these 6 people are from various parts of China. Nevertheless, they have similar lifestyles. They are different in personality, but this doesn't influence their daily interactions and relationships. Jun is a bit better than his roommates in academic performance, he thinks that it's probably because that he seldom plays computer games but often goes to the library. They all have siblings except for the boy from Heilongjiang.
Ying Zhang	Hefei, Anhui Province	Materials	It is a key university directly under the Ministry of Education. It is also a 211 Project university. According to Ying's introduction, there are more male than female students in both the university. As far as he knows, there should be more local students in his major and most of the students are from urban areas (around 70%) and the family which is not too rich nor too poor.	The 1st year	No, from Guizhou Province	There are 6 students in the dorm and they are classmates. They are around the same age but they come from various parts of China and not all of them are in the same ethnicity. The boys from Zhejiang and Qinghai and a local boy are from three different minority ethnic groups. Ying and the boys from Shandong and Shaanxi are Han. One roommate comes from rural area. However, Ying feels that their families are similar in terms of the economic status, as there is no big difference in living expenses among them. They are also different in terms of the academic performance, but they seldom talk about it in the dorm. Meanwhile, the Zhejiang boy may be the only 'one-child' in the dorm.
Yoyo Deng	Hefei, Anhui Province	Instrument Science and Optoelectronic Engineering	It is a key university directly under the Ministry of Education. It is also a 211 Project university. According to Yoyo's introduction, there are more male than female students in both the university and her major (around 3:1 in her major). As far as she knows, the students in her major come from various places of China, but those from Anhui are relatively more.	The 1st year	No, from Jiangxi Province	There are 4 students in the dorm, they are classmates and around the same age. They are all Han on ethnicity and all have siblings. The other three girls are from Anhui, Henan and Chongqing respectively. However, the Anhui girl grew up in Shanghai. One of these three may also comes from rural area but mainly lives in the city, which is quite similar to Yoyo's experience. It seems that they are all from well-off family, because their daily expenses are quite similar.
Yuanda Wen	Hefei, Anhui Province	Integrated Circuit Design and Integrated systems	It is a key university directly under the Ministry of Education. It is also a 211 Project university. According to Yuanda's introduction, there are more male than female students in both the university and his major. As far as he knows, the sources of students in his major are quite diversified and those from Anhui take up around 10% to 20% of the total. Yuanda likes his major and he feels that most students in this major are hardworking.	The 1st year	Yes	There are 6 students in the dorm and they are classmates. They are all at the same age and may all be Han in ethnicity. They come from different places but are all around the southern and eastern areas. They may all come from urban area and their families seem to be similar in terms of the economic status. Yuanda feels that none of them is too poor nor too rich in his dorm. Some of them have siblings while others are not, but Yuanda doesn't feel any difference between his daily interactions with these two groups of people.

Current undergraduate participants – information about their universities and dormitories (1)

Roommate Relationships in Chinese University Dormitories: Students' Life Experience and Perception

Appendices

Name(pseudonym)	Location of University	Major	Introduction of the university and the major	Year of study	Local student or not	Introduction of the dorm
Mingyu Wang	Hefei, Anhui Province	Pharmaceutical Engineering	It is a key university directly under the Ministry of Education. It is also a 211 Project university. According to Mingyu's introduction, there are more male than female students in both the university and his major(4:1 in his major). As far as he knows, the students around him are quite diversified in terms of the backgrounds and rural students seem to be relatively more. But he also said that it's difficult to find out the rich-poor gap between these students in everyday life. He guesses that more students in his university may come from Anhui. Mingyu is very busy with his study and other university affairs. The students around him are hardworking just before the exams.	The 2nd year	No, from Xi'an, Shaanxi Province	Mingyu changed the dorm at the beginning of the second year. His old roommates and him were divided into different subcategories of the major and thus in different classes, but they are required to live with classmates, so Mingyu was assigned to another dorm with three new roommates. There are 4 people in both the current and the old dorms. All these students come from various parts of China but they are all around the same age and are all Han in ethnicity. All of them are talkative and like communicating to understand each other in daily life. However, the current roommates all like playing computer games till the midnight and they are very noisy. Unfortunately, the communication in this dorm is difficult to conduct. So, Mingyu doesn't like this dorm and he is planning to move to another dorm in the next semester.
Wanyin Cao	Hefei, Anhui Province	English	It is a key university directly under the Ministry of Education. It is also a 211 Project university. According to Wanyin's introduction, there are more male than female students in the university but the situation is opposite in her major. She feels that most students in her major are from other places than Anhui and most of them should come from well-off family. The competitions in her class are not very fierce and the study is not that bring.	The 3rd year	No, from Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province	In the first 2 years, there were just 3 people in this dorm. In the beginning of this semester, a new roommate moved in. Before that, she changed her major from Marxist Philosophy to English. These 4 girls around the same age and in the same major, but Wanyin isn't in the same class as the other three. These 4 girls come from various parts of China (on local student), one of them comes from the rural area, so she does a plenty of part-time work to earn a living, which is different from the other three who are supported by parents. However, she could support herself well, because her living quality is not worse than others'. Their lifestyles are quite similar in most cases. Two of them are 'the only child of the family' but the other two both have an older sibling.
Yingying Tang	Hefei, Anhui Province	Transportation	It is a key university directly under the Ministry of Education. It is also a 211 Project university. According to Yingying's introduction, there are more male than female students in both the university(around 7.2) and her major(around 2:1). The female students in her major are the most in the whole department. As far as she knows, more students in the university may come from Anhui and the rural students take up around 30% of the total number of students in her class. However, she feels that the students in her class are quite similar in terms of the living quality and no one looks very rich or poor. She guesses that even there may be some students from the rich family, they may not show it off to avoid the hatred from others. She likes her major but feels a bit tired of studying.	The 3rd year	No, from Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province	There are 4 students in the dorm, they are classmates and around the same age. They are all Han in ethnicity. According to Yingying's observation, the students from the same place may be more likely to be assigned to the same dorm. Therefore, one of her roommates also comes from Zhejiang. Another roommate is a local student, but she completed her high school study in another province. Similarly, the last one comes from Henan but she completed her high school study in Xinjiang. There is one rural student in the dorm and Yingying guesses that the local girl may come from a richer family, but there is no big difference among these 4 girls in daily living expenses. Yingying thinks that her roommates are all better than her in terms of independent living, this may because that some of them have siblings. Their personality, taste and daily schedules are all different, but they can understand and comprise with each other, so Yingying feels that they get along well.
Zhen Ye	Hefei, Anhui Province	Intelligence Science and Technology	It is a key university directly under the Ministry of Education. It is also a 211 Project university. According to Zhen's introduction, there are more male than female students in both the university and his class(around 3:2). Zhen said that the ratio of men to women students in some majors are even larger. As far as he knows, most students in his class are from the well-off family and 1/4 to 1/3 of his classmates are from Anhui province. The competitions in his class are fierce and the students there are thus very hard-working in general.	The 2nd year	No, from Hebi, Henan Province	There are 4 students in the dorm, they are classmates and around the same age. They are all Han in ethnicity. Zhen feels that they are similar in terms of daily expenses, no one seems very rich or poor. Zhen's roommates are from Anhui, Liaoning and Shanxi respectively. Zhen's roommates are all better than him in the academic performance, but he feels good about that because he can ask them for help when meeting difficulties in study.
Bing Gu	Anyang, Henan Province	Food QuaBingy and Safety	It is an ordinary university. According to Bing's introduction, there are more male than female students in the university. But the female students are as many as male students in her class. As far as she knows, there are many local students in her class. According to her observation, the students are similar in terms of the Bingying quaBingy. She also feels that most students in her class are hard-working.	The 1st year	No, from Wuzhou, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous region	There are 6 students in the dorm. 5 of them are classmates but one girl comes from another major. However, they still belong to the same department. They are around the same age and Bing is the oldest. They are all Han in ethnicity. Three of them come from rural areas and another three from small cities. Bing feels that there is no difference among them in terms of their famBinges in terms of the economic status. Bing's roommates are from Henan, Hainan and Guangxi respectively. They are similar in terms of the bedtime and their academic performances are above average in general. Although sometimes someone want to stay up late to play computer games, she wouldn't bother others.
Yi Su	Anyang, Henan Province	Food Science and Engineering	It is an ordinary university. According to Yi's introduction, there are more male than female students in the university. But there are a bit more female students than male students in his class. As far as he knows, almost all the male students and half of the female students in his class are from other provinces than Henan. Most students in his class are from well-off family which is not too rich nor too poor. According to the registered permanent residence, more students in his class are from rural areas, but not all of them grew up in rural areas. There is just one class in his major, so the situation of his class is also that of his major. Like Wei Song, Yi is also the monitor of his class.	The 1st year	No, from Xinzhou, Shanxi Province	There are 6 students in this dorm. The beds here are bunk beds but students can select their own bunks. The roommates are assigned by the university according to the rule of 'same class or major' and the dorms allocated to each class are fixed. However, students can move to another dorm allocated to their class if they want, but this is not allowed after the registration. Yi and his roommates are all classmates and they are all around the same age and are all Han in ethnicity. One boy comes from Henan but not from Anyang. Another boy also comes from Shanxi and the rural area, but not Yi's hometown. The rest are from Jiangxi and Anhui respectively. Yi feels that their families are all around the same in economic status, which are not too rich nor too poor. There is no big difference in their lifestyles and they all like staying up late. They are all average in terms of academic performance.
Yongming Liu	Anyang, Henan Province	Biotechnology	It is an ordinary university. According to Yongming's introduction, there are almost equal numbers of female students and male students in his major. Only 30% of the students in his class are from Henan Province, but only 1 or 2 of them may come from Anyang. Almost half of the students in his class are from rural areas. However, Yongming feels that there seems to be no gap between the rich and the poor in his class because the students here are almost the same in terms of the living quality. He also feels that most students in his class study halfheartedly, particularly male students.	The 3rd year	No, from Sanmenxia, Henan Province	There are 4 students in the dorm, they are classmates and around the same age. They are all Han in ethnicity. Three of them come from Henan in central China but one from Fujian in southeastern China. Apart from Yongming, another two roommates also come from rural areas. They all have siblings except for that boy from the urban area. Yongming feels that all 4 of them are a bit poor in general. Their daily schedules are quite similar, but the boy from Fujian is different from the other three in eating habits, due to the regional difference. So, the other three seldom have meals with this boy. They are all a bit introvert, so Yongming feels that the atmosphere of their dorm is not as active as that of another dorm next to them. Their academic performances are all around the average in general, but Yongming's academic performance seems to be even worse. However, none of them care much about this. For them, passing the exam is enough.

Current undergraduate participants – information about their universities and dormitories (2)

Roommate Relationships in Chinese University Dormitories: Students' Life Experience and Perception

Appendices

Name(pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	The year of graduation and subsequent experiences	Current job	Current location	Local student or not	Rural or urban	Registered permanent residence	Parents' work	Parents' educational background	Only child' or not; whether sharing a bedroom	Having dorm experience before college or not	Currently living with
Ding Ma	25	Male	Han	Ding graduated in 2018, then he was recommended by his university for postgraduate study. Now he is in the third year of his Master study.	Postgraduate student	Beijing	No, from Wuhu, Anhui Province	Urban	Non-agricultural	Mother: manual employment; father: professional employment	Mother: vocational/professional qualification; father: university qualification	Yes	No	Roommates
Tong Chang	29	Female	Han	Tong graduated in 2015, then she studied in Guangzhou for a postgraduate course and got a Master's degree in International Education of Chinese Language. During the Master's study, she went to the USA for a year to be a volunteer teacher in a Confucius Institute. In 2019, Tong started her PhD study in Beijing.	PhD student	Beijing	No, from Nanning, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region	Urban	Non-agricultural	Professional employment	University qualifications	Yes	No	Roommates
Jianning Zhu	30	Female	Han	Jianning graduated in 2014, then she worked as an English teacher in a high school. From 2018 till now, she worked in a vocational school engaging in English teaching and research.	Teacher	Baicheng, Jilin Province	No, from Baishan, Jilin Province	Urban	Non-agricultural	Self-employment	School qualifications	An older brother (3 years older). They have never shared a bedroom.	No	Family (husband and child)
Pei Han	31	Female	Hui	Pei graduated in 2012, then she worked as a website operation staff.	Website operation staff	Shenzhen, Guangdong Province	No, from Shenzhen, Guangdong Province	Urban	Non-agricultural	Professional employment	University qualifications	Yes	Pei studied and lived in a boarding school during the high school years (3 years). In high school, Pei lived in a 6-person dorm with similar structure to that in the university. There were bunk beds in the high school dorm but no desk, as they were required to study in the classroom.	Family(husband and)
Sheng Luo	31	Male	Mongolian	Sheng graduated in 2012, then he joined a team and undertook some interior decoration projects. Several years later, he started a company with his friends.	Interior designer	Beijing	No, from Baicheng, Jilin Province	Urban	Non-agricultural	Professional employment	Mother: vocational/professional qualification; father: university qualification	Yes	No	Family(wife and child)
Boju Fu	28	Male	Man	Boju graduated in 2015. He should have started the postgraduate study at that time, but he changed his mind and found a job instead.	Staff of a Grid Corporation	Beijing	No, from Baicheng, Jilin Province	Urban	Non-agricultural	Mother: professional employment; father: self-employment	Vocational/professional qualifications	Yes	Boju lived in school dorm during the senior high school years (3 years) in Beijing. As a student from the other place, Boju voluntarily chose to reside in school for the convenience of study. There were also bunk beds in the high school dorm, but this dorm seemed to be more spacious than that in the college.	Flatmates; living alone
Yusheng Guan	27	Female	Han	Yusheng graduated in 2017, then she was recommended by her university to for postgraduate study in Guizhou province. After getting the Master's degree, she works in a vocational school till now.	Counselor/tutor	Xuzhou, Jiangsu Province	No, from Taian, Shandong Province	Urban	Non-agricultural	Professional employment	Mother: school qualification; father: university qualification	Yes	Yusheng participated in the College Entrance Examination twice. When preparing for the second entrance examination, she lived in the dorm of her high school, for the convenience of study. This dorm was a 4-person dorm and it was similar to that in the college in design.	Living alone
Yaping Huang	27	Male	Han	Yaping graduated in 2018, then he completed the 3-year postgraduate study in the same university and got a Master's degree. Now he is a first-year PhD student still in this university.	PhD student	Beijing	No, from Xiaogan, Hubei Province	Rural. In fact, Yaping's family moved to the county town when he was in high school.	Non-agricultural (Yaping changed his registration from 'agricultural' when attending the university)	Self-employment	School qualifications	An older sister(3 years older). They just shared a bedroom before Yaping went to the primary school.	Yaping lived in the school dorm throughout the whole junior high school years and the first half semester of the senior high school (around 3 years and several months). Generally speaking, the high school dorms were similar to the college dorm in design, but the physical living conditions of the junior high school dorm were the most terrible. However, this experience made Yaping more tolerant to any other dorm he subsequently lived in.	Roommates

Graduate participants basing in China – general demographic information

Roommate Relationships in Chinese University Dormitories: Students' Life Experience and Perception

Appendices

Name(pseudonym)	Location of University	Major	Introduction of the university and the major	The year of graduation and subsequent experiences	Introduction of the college dorm
Ding Ma	Harbin, Heilongjiang Province	International Education of Chinese Language	It is a provincial key university. According to Ding's introduction, during his college years, there were more female than male students in the university and his major. In his major, a bit more students come from Heilongjiang and most students come from urban areas. He feels that most students in his major were from the family with good economic status because most of them seemed to live a delicate life. He feels that the students in his major were generally a bit inattentive towards the study, but he was relatively more hardworking.	Ding graduated in 2018, then he was recommended by his university for postgraduate study. Now he is in the third year of his Master study.	There were 4 people in the dorm and all of them were around the same age. Three of them were classmates and one of them came from another major of their department. Meanwhile, this boy moved to this dorm in the third year of college. They are all Han in ethnicity and are all urban students. None of them has siblings. One of them is a local student. Another two also come from northern China, but Ding is the only one from the south.
Tong Chang	Guilin, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region	Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL)	It is a key university co-constructed by the Ministry of Education and the Regional government. Tong changed her major in the second year from English to TCFL. According to Tong's introduction, there were more female than male students in the university during her college years and the gap was more obvious in her majors. Most students in her majors are from Guangxi. Tong felt that the students in her first major were richer than those in her second major in general. This could be reflected in their daily expenses and their communications with Tong. Meanwhile, Tong's first major belongs to a chino-foreign cooperative educational programme, so the tuition fees are relatively higher and she thus thought that there should be no poor student in this major. She also knew that most of the students in her first major were urban students. In her second major, she knew that the students in her class were not too poor but just average in the economic status. Most students came from small county towns (the size and economy are usually inferior to the cities nearby). In the first two years, Tong felt that there were not too many modules for her to complete and the modules were not too difficult. Moreover, the competition in her first major was not fierce. So, she felt fine with the study at that time. However, she became more stressful after changing the major. On the one hand, the modules and research tasks increased a lot. On the other hand, the department she transferred to was very popular in the university, so the competition there was quite fierce and everyone was very hardworking.	Tong graduated in 2015, then she studied in Guangzhou for a postgraduate course and got a Master's degree in International Education of Chinese Language. During the Master's study, she went to the USA for a year to be a volunteer teacher in a Confucius Institute. In 2019, Tong started her PhD study in Beijing.	Tong changed the dorm in the second year, due to the change of major. The first dorm was a 4-people dorm with loft beds and the second dorm was a 6-people dorm with bunk beds. The roommates of two dorm were all her classmates, but those of the first dorm was assigned by the university while the new roommates were self-selected. When changing the dorm, Tong chose to live with three girls with whom she had good relationships. They were classmates in the first major and all transferred to the same major in the second year. Those three girls then found another three girls whom they knew and finally these 6 girls became roommates. All Tong's roommates in college are around the same age. They are all Han in ethnicity and all came from urban areas. Tong felt that all of them were from well-off families. None of them had siblings. They all come from Guangxi, a girl in the second dorm is a local student and others are all from Nanning. They were also all around the average level in academic performance.
Jianning Zhu	Changchun, Jilin Province	English	It is a key university directly under the Ministry of Education. It is also a 211 Project university. According to Jianning's introduction, there were more female than male students in both the university and her major. As far as she knew, there were fewer local students in her university and most students came from poorer families and rural areas. Their economic status could be found through daily expenses and communication. Meanwhile, she said that most poorer students worked as part-time family tutors in their spare time to earn their living expenses and support their families. For the large number of poorer students, Jianning explained that many students in her university were members of free normal education programmes (students in this programme usually don't have to pay for the tuition fees). Jianning also said that many students in her university were very hardworking. On the one hand, the attendance rates in the lectures she attended were always very good. On the other hand, the library was highly occupied almost every day and many students even went to the canteens to study when there was no seat in the library.	Jianning graduated in 2014, then she worked as an English teacher in a high school. From 2018 till now, she worked in a vocational school engaging in English teaching and research.	Jianning changed the dorm twice, as was required by the university. During the first two years, she was assigned to a dorm with bunk beds on the 1st floor. In the third year, she moved to a dorm with loft beds on the 4th floor. In the final year, she moved to another dorm with loft beds on the 3rd floor. However, her roommates and the basic facilities in the dorm didn't change. Jianning and her 5 roommates come from different provinces in northern, eastern and southwestern China respectively. They were all classmates. They are all around the same age and are all Han in ethnicity. There were three rural students but Jianning felt that they were all from the families which are not too rich or too poor, except for one rural girl who looked a bit poorer than others. In terms of academic performance, two rural girls were a bit better than others. There was just one girl in Jianning's dorm who didn't have any sibling.
Pei Han	Xian, Shaanxi Province	International Trade	It is an ordinary university. According to Pei's introduction, there were more female than male students in both the university and her major. Pei explained that it was probably related to the type of her university (the university is in Chinese language). As far as she knew, most students in both the university and her class were from northwestern China where the university is located. However, local students just took up a small proportion. Most students were from the families with average economic status. There were some rural students and most of them came from poor families. Pei felt that the study atmosphere around her was a bit polarized, some students studied very hard, while others were quite the opposite. For herself, Pei felt that she at least took the study seriously. In fact, she was a good student. She was recommended by the high school for admission to this university for undergraduate study. In the final year of college, she studied in France as an exchange student and finally got two Bachelor's degrees from both the universities in China and France respectively.	Pei graduated in 2012, then she worked as a website operation staff.	There were two loft beds and two bunk beds in the dorm. But there were shared desks under the loft beds. The dorm and roommates were assigned by the university but the beds could be selected by students. Pei chose a lower bunk near the door for the convenience to go to bed. There were 6 people in the dorm. They were all classmates and are around the same age. Pei is the only ethnic minority in the dorm, but she didn't feel any influence on her daily life or roommate relationships due to this. One of Pei's roommates was also her schoolmate in high school and they were all recommended students from Shenzhen. The rest come from Shandong, Shaanxi and Shanxi respectively, one of them was a rural student. All of these 6 girls came from well-off families. But the two Shenzhen girls seemed to be a bit better than others in economic status, according to their daily expenses. Most of these 6 girls were or had been class leaders and they were all beyond the average in academic performance. As a girl from the southeast, Pei was also different from her roommates in dietary habits. But this does not think that this influenced their relationships, due to the similarity of the environment they grew up which Pei thought was important to the intimacy. Pei felt that the physical living conditions of the dorm caused inconvenience to her life, particularly the lack of ensuite shower facilities.
Sheng Luo	Changchun, Jilin Province	Art Design	It is an ordinary university. According to Sheng's introduction, there were more female than male students in both the university and his major (both around 9:1). He explained that this might be related to the type of his university (normal university). As far as he knew, most students in his major came from other provinces. Few students in his major came from poor family, the economic status of their families were at least beyond the average. Meanwhile, almost all the students in his major were from urban areas. Sheng explained that his major was art-related, which needs a lot of expenses. However, Sheng also said that this situation of students' backgrounds was not the case for the whole university, particularly for the members of free normal education programme. Sheng liked his major, so he was hard working without being tired, although most students in his major were a bit lazy in study.	Sheng graduated in 2012, then he joined a team and undertook some interior decoration projects. Several years later, he started a company with his friends.	This was a dorm with 4 bunk beds, 8 lockers and a long desk shared by 8 people. They had to change the dorm every year, but every dorm they lived were almost the same in design. The bunks could be selected by students, but Sheng just randomly chose one in the first dorm. Nevertheless, he then felt very good about this bunk and position and thus selected the same bunk in every dorm after that. The 8 boys who lived there were all classmates and around the same age. At the beginning, there were just 6 people and 2 people moved from another dorm nearby in the second year, due to the division of major and adjustment of classes. Although the 8 boys' parents had different jobs, Sheng felt that the economic and social status of their families were all beyond the average. There were one or two rural students, but Sheng felt that they were even richer than urban students. These 8 boys came from various regions of China, so they were different in dietary habits and the feelings about the climate. But Sheng felt that these differences gave them chances to communicate and thus made their relationships more harmonious. Most of them were beyond the average in academic performance, except for one who even didn't graduated successfully. Apart from Sheng, another boy is also from the minority ethnic group (Chinese Korean). That boy was also the only one who have siblings in that dorm.
Boju Fu	Beijing	Electrical Engineering And The Automatization Specialty	It is a key university directly under the Ministry of Education. It is also a 211 Project university. According to Boju's introduction, his university and major are both engineering related, so there were more male than female students in both the university and his major. As far as he knew, most students around him were from well-off families, while only a few were from poorer families. These poorer students mainly came from rural and northwestern areas. Their economic status could be found through daily expenses and communication. There were fewer local students in his class and he thought that it might be also the case to the whole university, according to his observation. As for the academic atmosphere, Boju thought that most students in his major were hardworking. He explained that the enrollment requirements of his major were very strict, so those who could be here were usually excellent students, at least not bad.	Boju graduated in 2015. He should have started the postgraduate study at that time, but he changed his mind and found a job instead.	There were 6 people in the dorm. All of them were classmates and are around the same age. They were all from well-off families, even there was one boy from the rural area. Boju was the only ethnic minority in the dorm, but there is nothing different between him and others in any aspect of life. They came from various regions but there was no local student in this dorm. Most of them were beyond the average in terms of academic performance, but one boy was under the average. However, this didn't influence their relationships at all. They were all 'the only child' except for a boy who had a younger brother.
Yusheng Guan	Guiyang, Guizhou Province	English Translation	It is a provincial key university. According to Yusheng's introduction, there were more female than male students in both the university and her major. As far as she knew, most students in her university were from Guizhou, including local students. Most students in her class were from urban areas and well-off families. Some students in her class came from rural areas and their families were relatively poorer. Their parents were all peasants and almost all of them had siblings. These students were more simple in daily life and most of them received the subsidy from the university or the government. Yusheng was a class leader in college, so she knew a bit more detailed about the demographic information of her classmates. Meanwhile, Yusheng felt that those rural students seemed to be more self-abased and introverted. Yusheng felt that the academic atmosphere in her class was not good. Most students were transferred to her major because they didn't reach the enrollment requirements of the majors they applied. So, they were not interested in this major and thus didn't want to study hard. Some students were excellent, but many of them finally changed their major to medical ones which were popular in the university.	Yusheng graduated in 2017, then she was recommended by her university to for postgraduate study in Guizhou province. After getting the Master's degree, she works in a vocational school till now.	At the beginning, Yusheng lived in a 6-people dorm. In the third year, she and other 3 roommates moved to a 4-people dorm, as was required by the university. The two dorms were similar in physical living conditions. There were loft beds with desks and wardrobes in both of them. However, there were more storage spaces in the second dorm. When they changed the dorm, two of them voluntarily moved to other dorms. All the 6 girls were classmates even after changing the dorm. They were all Han and are around the same age. They all came from Guizhou province (including two local students) except for Yusheng who came from a northern province. Two of them came from rural areas and they were poorer than others (well-off level). However, one looked similar to others particularly in the expenses on makeup. Yusheng knew that she was a bit poorer just through the daily chat and her demographic information. Meanwhile, there were other differences among these 6 girls in personality, but they still got along well particularly when they regularly got to know each other. Half of these girls (including Yusheng) were good at study and hardworking and another half were not that good and cared less about study. Three girls had siblings, two of them were rural students and the rest were from a reconstituted family and thus is not related to her sibling by blood.
Yaping Huang	Beijing	Energy And Power Engineering	It is a key university directly under the Ministry of Education. It is also a 211 Project university. According to Yaping's introduction, there were more male than female students in both the university and his major (about 8:1). As far as he knew, there were only two rural students (including Yaping) in his class (2 out of 28). Most students in both his class and university were from urban areas and their parents were all professional employed. Yaping felt that these students were richer than him and he thought that the better the students, the more students of these backgrounds. He also said that most excellent students around him were from those families. There was just 1 local student in his class and he knew that there were no more than 10 local students in any class of his department. Yaping guessed that the local students in his university might just took up no more than 20% of the total. More students seemed to come from northern than southern China. Yaping felt that the academic atmosphere in his class was not good in general, there was just one or two students studied very hard. He also said that female students were more hardworking and did better in study than male students and it was also the case in other classes of his department and even the whole university. Yaping thought that this may be related to the larger number of male students, which made the whole atmosphere very impetuous.	Yaping graduated in 2018, then he completed the 3-year postgraduate study in the same university and got a Master's degree. Now he is a first-year PhD student still in this university.	Yaping lived in two dorms during college years, but they were almost the same in design. Both of them were 6-people dorms with loft beds. The roommates and the beds were all assigned by the university, according to the initial of the Chinese phonetic alphabet of students' surname. Meanwhile, the students of the same class would be assigned to the same dorm, so the Yaping and his roommates in the first dorm were also classmates. They moved together to the second dorm in the third year, as was required by the university. However, one of them moved to another dorm several months later, due to the change of major. Afterwards, an upper-year students of another major moved in but also left after half a year. Yaping was a bit older than his initial roommates. They are all Han in ethnicity. They were from different provinces but none of them was local student. Yaping's roommates were those he regarded as 'richer students' when introducing the students' backgrounds in the university. Yaping was the only one among the six who did well in study, but this didn't influence their relationships. Moreover, Yaping was also the only one of that dorm who had sibling.

Graduate participants basing in Chian – information about their undergraduate universities and dormitories

Appendix 7: Guidelines for participants (both graduate and undergraduate) in terms of photography and emotion maps (English version)



Roommate relationships in Chinese university dormitories: students' life experience and perception

Guidance of visual activities

Photos

Please take or find one or more photos of your dormitory room. What are included in the photos depend on you, for example, they could be things or spaces you like or dislike, private or shared. But please make sure that there is **no person in your photos**. If it's hard for you to provide any photo, I will show you some dormitory photos during the interview to remind you of your own dormitory.

Examples of the photos:

(Photos from the Internet)

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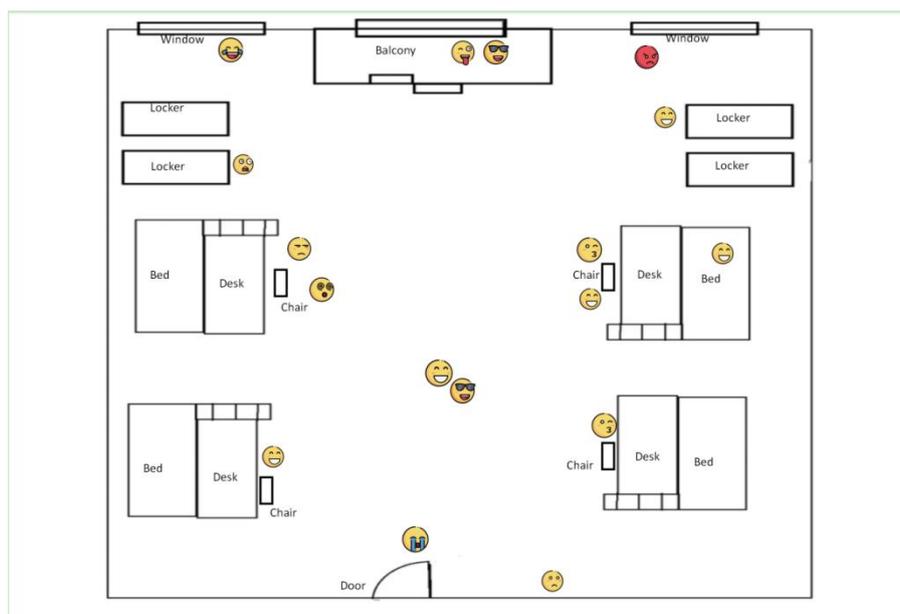
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Emotion maps

Please draw a simple floor plan of your dormitory room. Meanwhile, I will offer you a chart of some emoticon/feeling stickers. Please select and put certain stickers on certain parts of the floor plan to show your feelings about or any emotional experience in these areas. The following picture is an example of an emotion map completed on computer, but how to draw your floor plan, how many emoticons to use and where to put them on the map are all up to you.



An example of the emotion map



Remarks

The photos and emotion maps don't have to be the same as the examples.

You could send me the photos, emotion maps or their copies before the interview, or complete these during the interview.

You can send these documents to me in the way you like. If you send them via post, I can pay for the postage. If you send them online, please encrypt what you send and tell me about the password by separate means.

For any question about these two activities, please don't hesitate to contact.





Contact

This is a PhD research project based at The University of Sheffield. Should you have any question, please do not hesitate to contact me (the researcher):

Guanyi Xu

Email: gxu12@sheffield.ac.uk

WeChat: xiaomu104

For more questions or complaints about this research, you can also contact my supervisors:

Professor Sarah Neal

Email: s.neal@sheffield.ac.uk



Appendix 8: Code book of research data**Roommate relationships in Chinese university dormitories: students' life experience and perception****Codes**

Name	Description	Files	References
Changes of residence	Changes of dorms during college years and after graduation, including changed and unchanged things and relationship experiences.	17	174
Conflicts between roommates	Dorm tensions and confrontations and how these are managed.	17	39
Discomfort in dorm living		0	0
Discomfortable design of the dorm	The material design of dorm spaces and furnishing which made participants uncomfortable	12	31
Problems related to annoying roommates	The issues on which negative emotional and relational experiences with roommate(s) emerged	26	125
Everyday interactions	General dorm interactions in daily life	30	226
Changes on impression	Changes on participants' feelings about their roommates from the time when they first met	9	12
Ideal roommate relationship	Participants' definitions of ideal roommate relationship and whether it has been achieved in practice	14	15
Influence of the dorm living experience in the university	What do participants learn from the shared dorm living experiences	29	38
Interaction and relationships during the pandemic	The influences of pandemic and lockdown on college roommate relationships	8	9
Intimacy between roommates		0	0
Building and	How the intimate roommate	30	241

Name	Description	Files	References
development	relationships were established and how this closeness evolved throughout college years and after graduation		
Perception of friends	How participants define friendship and how they think of their friendships with roommates	29	34
Special collective memories	The unforgettable or significant moments and activities experienced together with roommates	26	65
Living experience with the 'only child'	Feelings about living with the roommate who are the 'only child', whether and how they are different from those who have siblings.	20	24
Public-private boundary	How participants and their roommates manage public-private boundaries in shared living in such a residential environment with highly communal spaces and plenty of shared facilities.	30	147
Shared living experience before college	Pre-college shared living experience, including dorm living but excluding the living experience with parents (and siblings) at home.	18	41
Living experience with siblings	Participants' accounts referring to their siblings (including the age gaps and relationships)	14	26
Space of the dorm	Dorm spaces and items which participants have emotions shown on their emotion maps and those displayed in their dorm photos. Including the relevant sensory experiences, roommate interactions and relational negotiations.	0	0
Public space between dorms	Communal spaces shared by participants' dorms and other dorms, usually outside the dorm rooms with beds, including living room and public study room, toilet, water room and the public room for clothes drying.	11	11

Appendices

Name	Description	Files	References
Indoor space and items	The spaces and items inside the dorm rooms	0	0
Appliances	Shared water dispenser	2	2
Balcony	Including how participants and roommates share the balcony and how this place is occupied by some participants as a personal retreat.	23	42
Bathroom	Including sensory experiences and cleanliness-related issues and interactions	7	13
Bed area	The bunk/loft-bed (including its position) and the surrounding items like bed curtain and personal desk. Also including both participants' and their roommates' bed areas.	0	0
Personal bunk or bed area	Participants' narrative about their own bed areas, including their daily use of and personalised curation on these areas	0	0
Bed curtain	How participants (and their roommates) hang bed curtains around their beds for residential needs like protecting privacy, creating personal spaces and blocking out the light in the highly communal dorm space, and how these material practices are associated with the social life and relationship negotiations in everyday dorm living.	21	29
Personal bunk	How participants feel about their upper or lower bunks in shared dorm living, including both the positive experiences and irritations like being sat by others without permission.	9	14
Personal loft bed	Including the loft desk, shelf, wardrobe, bed ladder and the board linking two beds	21	67
Roommates' personal	All the emoticons in this area are used to reflect participants' feelings and/or	27	85

Appendices

Name	Description	Files	References
bunk or bed area	relationships with the owners of these bunks/loft-beds. This area represents its owner in this sense.		
Dorm door	Including participants' feelings about the door and their emotions when they get in and out of their dorms and the relevant relational experiences.	6	8
Shared mirror	Including the mirror bought with roommates and those had been already installed in the dorm.	3	6
Personal belongings	Participant's roommate's personal belonging shared with him	1	3
Communal lockers, shelves and wardrobes	The public dorm furniture which needs to be shared by participants and their roommates	8	9
Shared-desk area	The sharing of a whole desk or desk area with roommates in some dorms where there is no independent desk or loft-desk. Including the sharing and division practices, curation on the personal part and relevant emotional and relational experiences	7	14
The central area of the dorm	How participants and their roommates share the public central space of the dorm, including how they clean and decorate this space together, how they spend time together in this area and other positive and negative experiences happened in this space.	15	23
Window	Including the window and sill.	2	3
Structure	Including participants' feelings about the general size and original furnishing of their dorms.	9	17
The influence of family background on everyday life and relationships	Including the influence of participants' family backgrounds on their dorm living and relationships and their living experience with roommates with different family backgrounds.	18	44

Appendices

Name	Description	Files	References
University rules	How participants and their roommates navigate the residency rules made by their universities in everyday life and how these are associated with their relationships.	30	63

Appendix 9: Participants' dormitory photos (the photos I did not display in previous chapters)

Chen Jiang (male, graduated)



Chen's dorm desk

Wei Song (male, third-year undergraduate)



Wei's dorm decorated by Wei and his roommates, using small light bulbs

Jun Tian (male, first-year undergraduate)



Jun's bed and his roommate's bed nearby

Appendices



Jun's dorm desk



Jun's personal loft-bed area



Jun's personal loft-bed area (2)



The balcony of Jun's dorm

Appendices



The door of Jun's dorm

Yoyo Deng (female, first-year undergraduate)



The communal locker of Yoyo's dorm



Yoyo's dorm desk



The bathroom of Yoyo's dorm

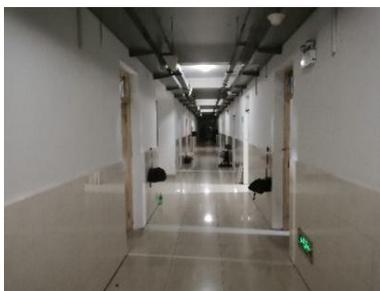


The public central area of Yoyo's dorm

Yuanda Wen (male, first-year undergraduate)



The scenery outside Yuanda's dorm building



The corridor of Yuanda's dorm building



Yuanda's dorm desk before his personalised decoration

Bing Gu (female, first-year undergraduate)



The public central area of Bing's dorm

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The balcony of Bing's dorm

Yi Su (male, first-year undergraduate)



A communal space shared by Yi's dorm and another dorm



Yi's dorm with bunk beds



The communal locker in Yi's dorm

Yongming Liu (male, third-year undergraduate)



Yongming's dorm with a balcony



Yongming and his roommates' bunks

Ding Ma (male, graduated)

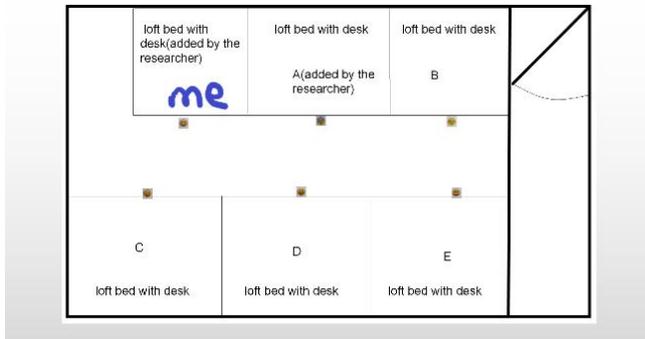


Ding's dorm

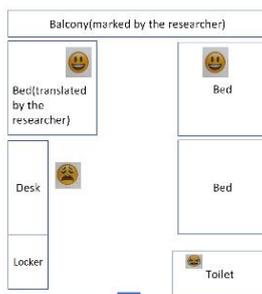


Ding's personal loft-bed area

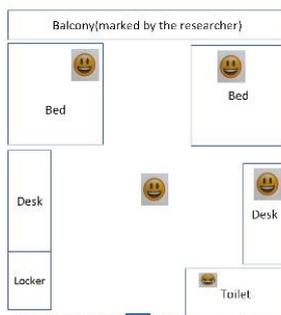
Appendix 10: Participants' emotion maps (the emotion maps I did not display in previous chapters)



Chen Jiang's dorm

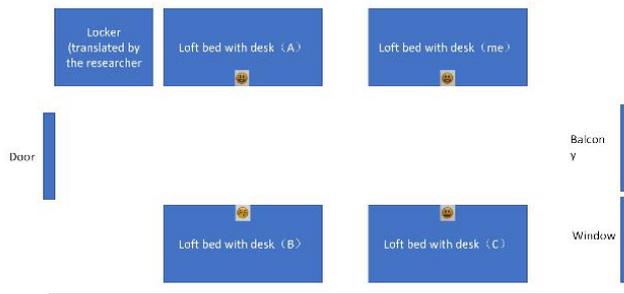


Lin Jin's first dorm (male, graduate)

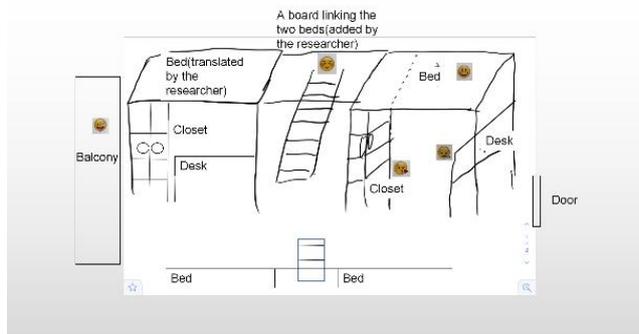


Lin's second dorm

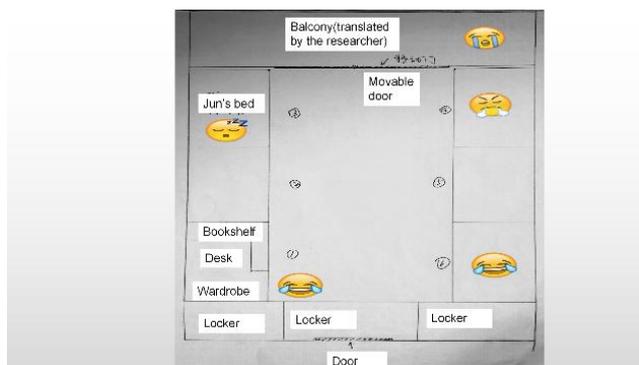
Appendices



Yanli Jiang's dorm (female, graduate)

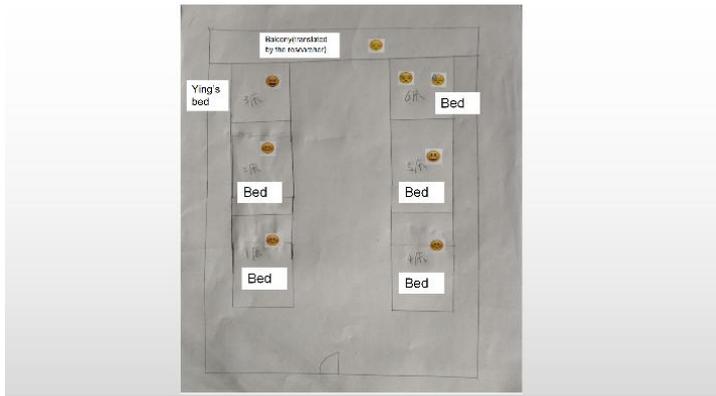


Mei Hu's dorm (female, graduate)



Jun Tian's dorm

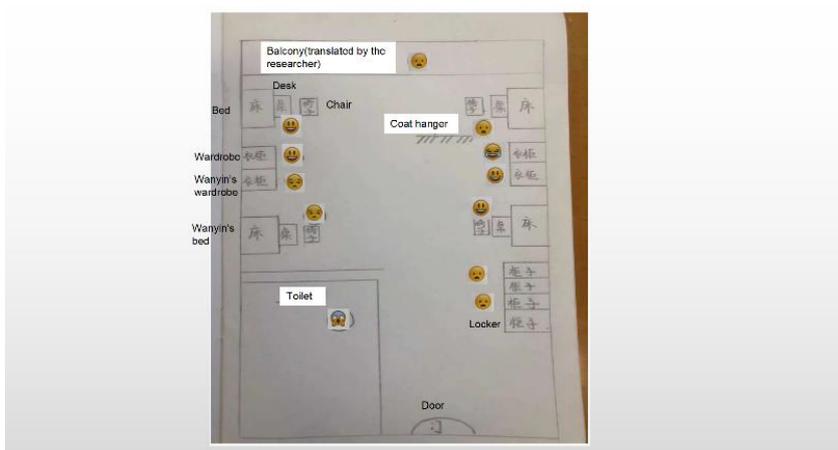
Appendices



Ying Zhang's dorm (male, first-year undergraduate)

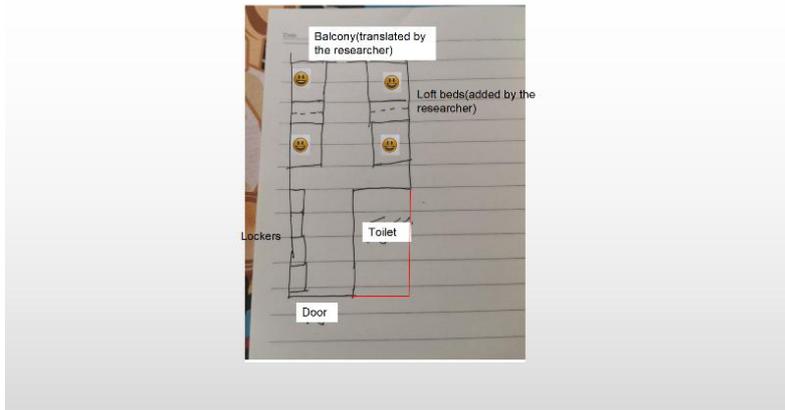


Yuanda Wen's dorm

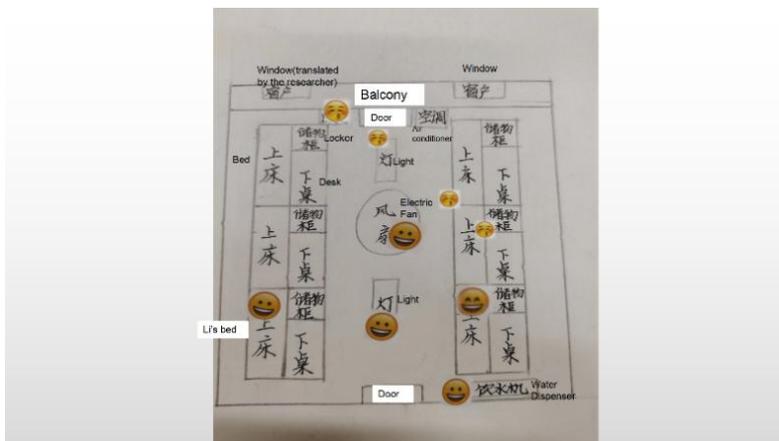


Wanyin Cao's dorm (female, third-year undergraduate)

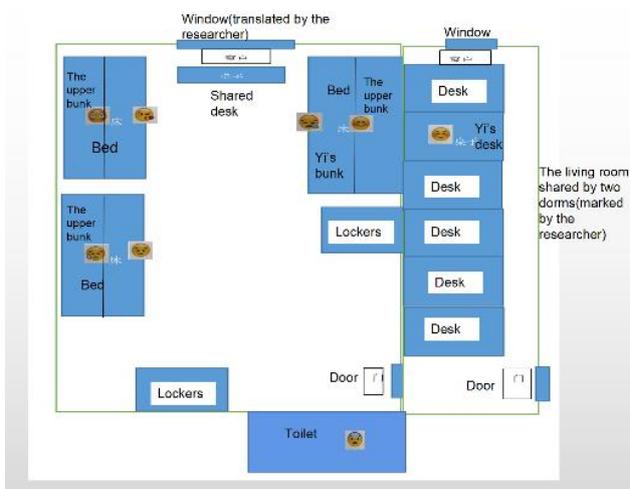
Appendices



Zhen Ye's dorm (male, first-year undergraduate)

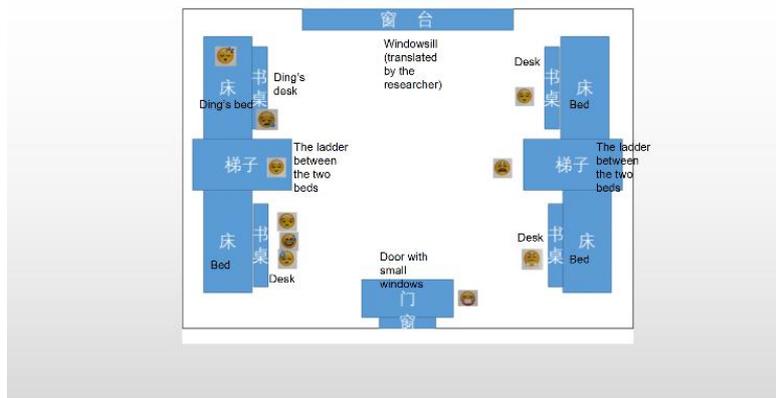


Bing Gu's dorm

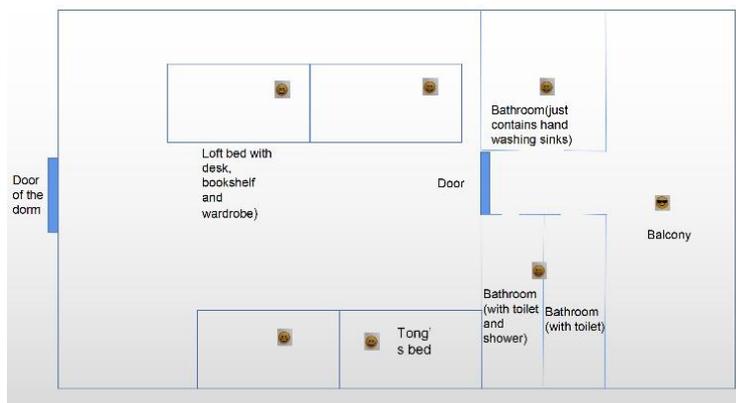


Yi Su's dorm

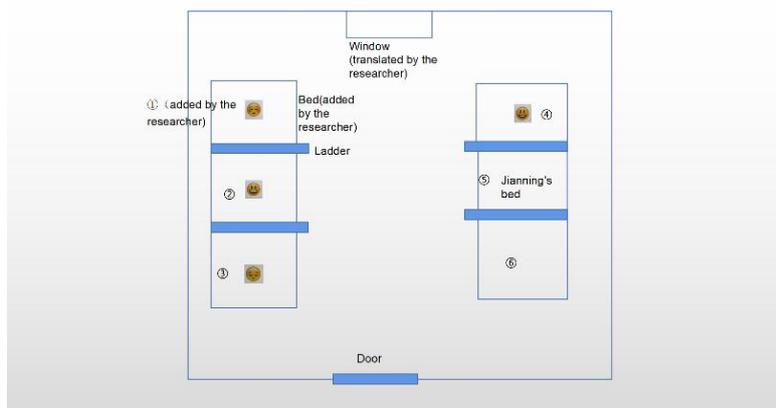
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Ding Ma's dorm

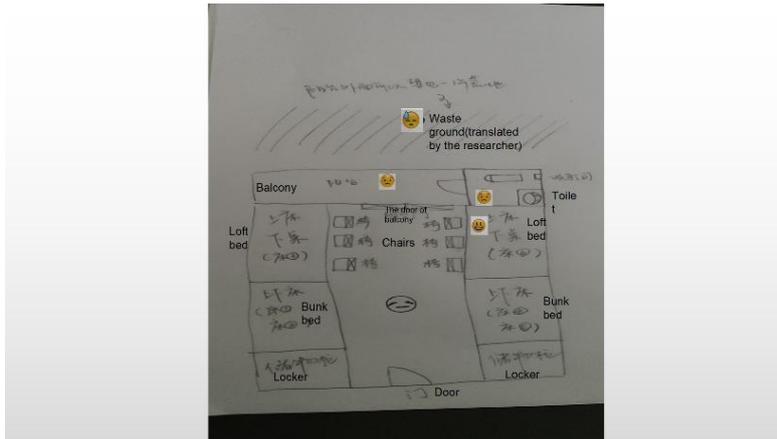


Tong Chang's first dorm (female, graduate)



Jianning Zhu's dorm (female, graduate)

Appendices



Pei Han's dorm (female, graduate)

Appendix 11: Sources of online dormitory pictures shown to participants (during interviews and in the guideline of photography and emotion maps)

Dormitory pictures shown in the interviews (all accessed at 15 December 2020):

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(also used in the guidance of photography and emotion maps)

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Dormitory pictures displayed in the guideline of photography and emotion maps (for the guideline, see Appendix 7):

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