Has ‘nearby’ Disappeared? Examining Its Vanishing Among Chinese University Students

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MSc in Education (Comparative and International Education), 2025

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MSc Education (CIE) Dissertation

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August 2025

Abstract

Xiang Biao proposed the concept of "nearby" as a form of everyday social space generated through bodily presence and sustained interaction. In recent years, "nearby" was regarded as being increasingly compressed due to intensive spatial planning and pervasive media environments. This study adopts "nearby" as a theoretical lens to examine how university students in Shanghai perceive, experience, and construct their world, and explore the possibilities for the reproduction of "nearby" in contemporary urban life. By combining mapping and deep conversation, this research reveals students' perceptions of "nearby" as shaped within the interstices of institutional modernity.

The study found that the compression of "nearby" is primarily manifested in time discipline, spatial functionalisation, and digital media. It proposes an "island-chain model", which reveals that students' living spaces consist of functional nodes lacking transition and emotional connection, forming a fragmented pattern in macro perspective. At the micro level, students maintain close relationships within these dispersed nodes, shaped by the influence of traditional Chinese culture. Clear differences in the perception of "nearby" are also observed across gender and cultural backgrounds.

This study contributes to current studies by capturing the tension between rational modernisation drive and Chinese tradition. Its greatest innovation lies in the combination of the perception-based map drawing and in-depth interviews, providing a novel and viable path for the visualisation of one's memory. This has integrated time and space both theoretically and methodologically, plus appropriately demonstrates the practice of the concept "nearby". Second, it develops a multi-dimensional analytical framework for understanding contemporary Chinese youth through the interweaving of ecofeminism, the differential mode of association (chaxugeju), and modern higher education system. Overall, although "nearby" was noticed to be compressed, it still shows the possibility of reconstruction in youth practice.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

The concept of “nearby” was first introduced by Professor Xiang Biao as a theoretical tool to understand the evolving dynamics of social interaction and spatial experience in contemporary society (Xiang & Kang, 2023). Unlike the traditional notion of community, “nearby” does not refer to a clearly bounded physical unit. It is a dynamic and socially meaningful space that emerges through bodily presence and continuous everyday interaction. The social encounters that constitute “nearby” often involve street vendors, sanitation workers, neighbours, and other individuals not formally bound by institutional arrangements. Rather than being organized through systems or regulations, these weak yet genuine connections are formed through repeated contact in the routines of daily life.

However, under the combined pressures of modernisation, urbanisation, and digital technology, the influence of “nearby” in people’s lives is steadily declining. The strict schedule in university life has compressed students’ opportunities to linger, interact, and engage with their physical surroundings. Tasks such as courses, examinations, and internship dominate their schedules, reducing the space for unstructured experiences (Shostya, 2015; Song et al., 2020). On the other hand, social media platforms and algorithmic content delivery have reshaped students’ attention and information pathways (Sun et al., 2024). As a result, students increasingly rely on digital channels for social engagement and become less attuned to the people and environments around them. In this context, the space of “nearby”, once characterized by physical accessibility and emotional intimacy, is gradually losing its significance and may even fade away.

More profound transformations are also taking place in how university students construct their worldview. In a media-saturated environment, experiential knowledge acquired through bodily perception is being replaced by abstract concepts, dominant discourses, and online narratives. In a reality marked by information overload and experiential scarcity, young people’s social perception

becomes fragmented, their daily rhythms instrumentalized, and both spatial awareness and relational sensibility gradually eroded (Xiang & Kang, 2023).

Against this backdrop, revisiting "nearby" as an analytical concept offers a new theoretical perspective for understanding the spatial experiences and social capacities of contemporary Chinese youth. This research centres "nearby" as a lens to explore how students perceive and engage with the social world, while also examining how this process is shaped by multiple forces including modernisation, urban planning, and digital media. In contrast to existing studies that focus on psychological well-being or interpersonal communication among students, this work foregrounds spatial experience and emphasizes how spatial structure, daily tempo, and institutional logics jointly reshape students' modes of perception and relational patterns.

Previous research has often addressed university students' mental states and communication strategies in the digital era (Li et al., 2009; Chi et al., 2016), yet has paid limited attention to the spatial dimension, particularly the ways in which micro-level experiences of "nearby" are reconstructed by institutions and media environments. This study seeks to fill that theoretical gap by grounding analysis in lived experience, and by revealing how the transformation of "nearby" reflects deeper cultural logics within China's broader structural changes.

In the context of rapid digitalisation and urban development, the everyday spaces of young people are increasingly losing their functions as sources of emotional support and social connectivity. The erosion of "nearby" reflects not only a depersonalization of physical space but also a fragmentation of social relationships. Through qualitative methods such as map-drawing and semi-structured interviews, this research seeks to capture the subtle and complex nature of this transformation. It also aims to explore how education, spatial governance, and cultural practice might help restore students' connections to the real world, rebuilding their social perception and capacity for meaningful action. This study further employs "nearby" to examine how Western-origin higher education systems adapt to the Chinese context. It also considers how China might draw

upon its own cultural and institutional strengths, seeking pathways that integrate global models with local traditions to develop a contextually grounded approach.

1.2 Research Questions and Objectives

This study does not aim to offer a definitive judgment on whether "nearby" has disappeared. Rather, it adopts "nearby" as an analytical lens to explore how contemporary Chinese university students experience their social space in everyday life. By focusing on spatial experiences and social interactions associated with "nearby", the research aims to uncover how students' experiences are shaped by their broader socio-cultural environment, especially the spatial elements, thereby reflecting the structural and cultural transformations taking place in contemporary Chinese society.

More specifically, the study first investigates how students describe their relationships with people around them and with the places they inhabit, as well as the contexts in which these relationships are formed, maintained, or neglected. Second, it examines the key factors influencing the formation of "nearby", particularly how individuals navigate or disengage from real-world spatial connections. Finally, the research explores how changes in spatial experience further affect students' self-perception, sense of belonging, and their capacity and willingness to engage with the real world.

Based on these goals, this study is guided by the following three core research questions:

1. Has the "nearby" disappeared? How do university students in contemporary China construct this kind of social space?
2. What social, cultural, and technological factors influence their interaction with the "nearby"?
3. How does the transformation of the "nearby" affect students' perceptions and their capacity for social action?

Through a systematic exploration of these questions, the study aims to deepen our understanding of young people's spatial experiences and offer new practical

insights for fields such as education, urban governance, and community development.

1.3 Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into six chapters, with “nearby” serving as both a theoretical framework and an object of empirical investigation. Drawing from anthropology, sociology, and educational research, the study seeks to systematically explore how Chinese university students perceive real-world space and engage in social practices amid rapid social transformations.

The first chapter introduces the background, research questions, and objectives, while also providing an overview of the structure. It outlines the analytical importance of “nearby” and positions this study in relation to existing literature, identifying its theoretical and practical contributions.

Chapter 2 engages with relevant literature, focusing on concepts such as the differential mode of association (chaxugeju), the group mode of association (tuantigeju), and the risk behind. This chapter also identifies current gaps in research, particularly the lack of attention to micro-level spatial practices and the use of Chinese local theory in current research.

In the third chapter, the research design is detailed, including methodological approach, epistemological stance, and ethical considerations. The study adopts a qualitative strategy that combines arts-based methods with semi-structured interviews. Sampling procedures and ethical safeguards are also discussed in detail.

Findings are presented in the fourth chapter, which is structured around three levels of analysis: macro-level spatial compression, micro-level reconstruction of relationships, and the extension of digital spaces. This section introduces the “island-chain model” put forwarded by the author to describe the fragmented configuration of functional nodes in university spaces and examines how students reconstruct emotionally meaningful “nearby” spaces within institutional gaps.

The fifth chapter deepens the theoretical discussion by drawing on ecofeminism and the localisation of global higher education. The former emphasizes the emotional and ethical role of non-human life in students' spatial perception, challenging dominant spatial logics centred on institutional rationality. The latter analyses how globally standardized higher education systems undermine local cultural practices and everyday social life, and what China could learn from it. It proposes Cultural Impact Assessment and *Buen Vivir* as possible strategies for reform that supports coexistence between modern institutional forms and local relational values.

Concluding the thesis, the final chapter summarizes the main findings and highlights the study's theoretical and methodological contributions. It also reflects on limitations and outlines directions for future research. Beyond academic insights, this chapter calls for greater attention from scholars and policymakers to the ways in which young people can regenerate social connection and spatial engagement under institutional and technological constraints.

2. Literature Review

This chapter outlines the relevant research background from four key perspectives. First, it examines how the compression of everyday space under modern structures gives rise to physical constraints, emotional disconnection and the challenges of highly regulated living. Second, it turns to China's local social structure to explore how the differential mode of association (chaxugeju) underpins the cognitive foundation of traditional "nearby" relationships. The third section focuses on how digital technologies intensify the phenomenon of hollow heart syndrome, thereby further weakening the presence of "nearby" through media, fragmented temporalities and standardised education. Finally, the chapter considers how Shanghai, as a pioneer city, attempts to respond to the absence of "nearby" through spatial planning and governance initiatives such as the "15-minute community life circle". Together, these strands establish a foundational framework for understanding the social and psychological context of students' spatial experience explored in this study.

2.1 Spatial Compression, Perceptual Alienation: Why "nearby" Matters

In recent years, the concept of "nearby" has gradually become a crucial entry point for understanding contemporary Chinese society, particularly the spatial experiences of young people and the transformation of their social relationships. Xiang and Kang (2023) note that '"nearby"' does not refer to geographic proximity or the traditional notion of community, but rather a relational, perceptible, everyday space produced through repeated interactions, encounters, and bodily presence in the real world; it is not only a spatial perception, but a structural experience of social connection. In contemporary world, increasingly fragmented rhythms, institutionalised education systems and the deep penetration of digital media make it ever more difficult for people to establish stable and sustainable social relationships in real space, leading to the gradual shrinking and even disappearance of the "nearby".

This study chooses "nearby" as the core lens to analyse the spatial experience of Chinese university students, both due to the urgency of real-life problems and

clear theoretical considerations. The concept of “nearby” responds to typical problems faced by university students today: the fragmentation and abstraction of spatial perception, and the scarcity of opportunities for authentic interaction (Xiang & Kang, 2023). A further point is that, compared to the many youth studies focusing on mental health, media use or consumer behaviour, “nearby” offers a unique approach grounded in spatial sociology, emphasising the tension between embodied practice and social structure. More importantly, this concept is highly localised and theoretically innovative, proposed by Chinese scholars to respond directly to emerging issues in China’s social transformation. It avoids the orientalist pitfalls of uncritically applying Western theoretical models, and instead seeks to understand Chinese youth within their own social context.

To further understand the mechanism of its disappearance, we must reconsider the nature of space itself. Lefebvre (2012) argues that space is never a neutral container in nature, but a social product co-produced by social relations, power structures and institutional logics. Under the systems of modern cities and universities, space is organised into a highly functional, goal-oriented network of nodes. Taking universities as an example, student life is segmented into a series of task-oriented spaces: dormitories for resting, classrooms for learning, canteens for eating, and undergrounds for commuting. These spaces have clearly singular purposes, are isolated from one another and lack both transition and openness. Such a spatial structure severely compresses the foundations for “nearby” to grow, reducing life to a set of lowest-cost commuting routes.

At the urban scale, this logic of spatial compression manifests as the proliferation of "non-places" (Augé, 2020). This concept represents that, under supermodernity, urban space increasingly tends towards anonymity, transience and mono-functionality. Places such as metro stations, shopping malls and airports cannot bear identity, memory or emotional connection. He calls these spaces "non-places". In many Chinese universities, especially newly built suburban campuses, the characteristics of non-places are particularly prominent: lacking surrounding traditional neighbourhoods and public squares to support social interaction.

Students pass through these spaces daily, but find it difficult to form emotional bonds with them, “nearby” cannot naturally emerge within such urban ecologies.

Moreover, spatial compression is not only physical, but also profoundly reshapes individual consciousness. Marcuse (2013) notes that modern society trains individuals to become obedient executors through technical rationality and institutional mechanisms, gradually depriving them of the ability to perceive space or choose lifestyles. In university systems, students’ lives are incorporated into highly standardised rhythms, from timetables and commuting to information reception. They gradually grow accustomed to an efficiency-first, task-oriented lifestyle, in which space is simplified into a route to a destination rather than a site for generating life. Even if space objectively exists, individuals may not perceive its emotional or social meaning, the perceptual structure of “nearby” is thus thoroughly compressed or even forgotten.

Nevertheless, the social construction of space does not render individuals entirely passive. De Certeau and Mayol (1998) stress that walking within institutionalised space is itself an act of agency and creativity. Walking is not merely a physical movement through space, but a micro-resistance and recoding of order. When someone chooses to stop, observe, linger or interact, they are rewriting space in their own way. These embodied everyday practices make space perceptible and reconnected. It is precisely in these subtle, non-institutionalised actions that “nearby”, as a potential space for social relations, can fleetingly reappear and continue.

Therefore, “nearby” is both a social formation compressed by spatial organisation and institutional order, and a way for observing changes in young people’s perceptual abilities and relational experiences. It points both to the intense organisation of life by urban structures and educational systems, and to the reflexive practices that individuals may still engage in under such systems. Adopting “nearby” as a research lens is an attempt to capture how Chinese university students, in the interplay between macro-institutional pressure and micro-daily practice, construct, suppress, transform and contest their social connections with the real world. This perspective addresses issues of social

structure, and grants full theoretical legitimacy to individual experience at the same time, which is a crucial point for understanding young people's cognitive dynamics and emotional order today.

2.2 Tuantigeju and Chaxugeju: The Cultural Background of Relational Dissolution

To understand the changes in Chinese university students' spatial and relational experiences, we have to return to the structures of social organisation in Chinese society. The relational logic of Chinese society differs significantly from the contract-based "团体格局"tuantigeju (group mode of association) found in Western societies. Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong proposed the concept of "差序格局"chaxugeju (differential mode of association) in From the Soil, emphasising that interpersonal relations in China are not organised through clear group boundaries and equal individual status, but expand outward layer by layer from the individual, based on closeness, emotional intensity and moral obligation, like ripples on the water (Fei et al., 1992). In this model, social relationships are highly fluid and informal, with a focus on "circles" rather than "structure". The strength and credibility of a relationship depend on one's position and distance.

The formation of this relational logic is not accidental but deeply rooted in China's long-standing Confucian culture and traditional educational institutions. Since the Han dynasty, Confucianism has been the state ideology, emphasising a moral order of self-cultivation, family regulation, state governance, and bringing peace to the world, placing individual conduct within a hierarchical structure and network of relationships for moral discipline. Within this cultural framework, teachers are not only transmitters of knowledge but also guides of virtue and moulders of character, often holding a status equal to that of a father. As the old saying goes, "A teacher for a day, a father for a lifetime", reflecting the ethical, emotional and authoritative nature of educational relationships. Liu (2008) in his study on the evolution of China's educational system, pointed out that in traditional society, teacher-student relationships contained both patriarchal

features and spiritual dependency. Students respected teachers not merely for their transmission of knowledge, but for their social role and moral cultivation.

This cultural soil provides a deep foundation for the formation and persistence of chaxugeju. In the Confucian educational system, the school is not a fully institutionalised neutral space, but a micro-society where relational networks often emerge naturally according to ethical proximity. Education is not merely a process of knowledge transfer but also one of order construction, in which influence often outweighs institutional authority. Even in modern society, as standardised and bureaucratic systems are implemented in education, the logic of the traditional familiar society still continues in teacher-student and peer relationships. It can be said that chaxugeju is further a socially inherited cognitive model.

This structural logic continues to exist in contemporary university spaces. Although universities are designed as institutional organisations, students' understanding and construction of interpersonal relationships still follow the logic of chaxugeju. Hu (2024) points out that in the seemingly modernised and anonymous urban society of China, chaxugeju has not disappeared but is implicitly embedded in new institutional logics and organisational structures. University students reconstruct their familiar order in dormitories, classes and student societies, forming small relational networks based on mutual understanding, emotional support and reciprocity. Chen & Xu (2025) further argue that contemporary Chinese cities are forming a light acquaintance society, in which individuals, despite facing unfamiliar institutional environments, still rebuild trust and support structures through micro-networks.

The continued importance of these familiar networks is also closely related to the enduring influence of collectivist culture in contemporary education. The Confucian tradition's emphasis on group identity, hierarchical order and individual obedience still exerts a subtle influence in modern education. Even though China's education system is now highly institutionalised in form, its curriculum and management systems still retain many core Confucian values, especially in moral education courses which emphasise responsibility, loyalty and obedience (Deng, 2011). As a result, students do not act solely based on Western-style contractual

and individualist principles in their organisational behaviour and relationship building. Instead, they tend to seek recognition and support in familiar small groups, reinforcing "情" (affection) and "义" (righteousness) within relationships.

Therefore, introducing tuantigeju and chaxugeju as part of the theoretical framework for analysing university students' relational experiences and spatial organisation in this study is both theoretically and practically justified. It is rooted in the unique socio-cultural context of China and helps explain the continued existence of non-institutional relationships in higher education. Furthermore, it reminds us that in discussing how Chinese university students understand “nearby” and build connections in space, we cannot rely solely on Western spatial sociology concepts such as publicity or citizenship. Instead, we must consider how individual actions unfold within complex networks of closeness and cultural expectations in the Chinese context. Chaxugeju not only shapes relational structures but also profoundly influences students' perceptions of space, their sense of belonging and modes of participation.

2.3 Digital Media and the Contemporary Crisis of Youth “Floating”

In understanding the absence of “nearby”, the profound impact of digital media technologies on young people’s spatial cannot be overlooked. The digitised lifestyle based on the internet is constantly breaking the traditional boundaries of time and space while reshaping modes of interpersonal connection. The internet is not merely a tool for information dissemination but a space for constructing a network society (Castells, 2002). It enables a mode of communication detached from geographical constraints, in which online presence increasingly replaces on-site participation. Within this technological context, the spatial organisation of young people's daily lives has undergone dramatic change. University students can now complete a range of activities like studying, socialising, even shopping within their dormitories, without embedding themselves in any specific physical community.

At the same time, digital media deeply affect the structure of interpersonal relationships. Granovetter (1973), in his theory of weak ties, argues that modern

social interaction increasingly relies on low-intensity, low-frequency weak relationships, which are amplified infinitely in the internet era. Furthermore, while modern individuals have more social contacts, their actual core relationship networks capable of deep communication have significantly shrunk, and a sense of social isolation is quietly growing (McPherson et al., 2006). Although media offer extensive possibilities for connection, adolescents' intimate relationships are diminishing. They increasingly face pressures from image anxiety, self-presentation, and pseudo-intimacy in online interactions. These virtual acquaintance networks, though technically convenient, often lack substantial trust, empathy, and support, leading young people into a state of loneliness in connection (Ehrenreich, 2022).

These structural changes are both reflected in space and interpersonal networks and manifest psychologically as metaphors of floating and hollow heart syndrome. In the Chinese context, this phenomenon is referred to as hollow heart syndrome. It describes the psychological state among youth under prolonged exam-oriented education and societal pressure: loss of goals, emotional exhaustion, and existential emptiness (Huang & Xu, 2019). This is both a matter of cognition or emotion, and a symptom of social disembeddedness, where individuals remain physically embedded in institutional spaces such as universities but gradually lose psychological and relational support, becoming rootless and adrift.

This hollow state is also closely linked to media usage. Wu et al (2024) found a mutually reinforcing causal relationship between loneliness and problematic social media use: the more media use, the stronger the sense of loneliness, which in turn drives increased media dependency. This emotional-media loop further intensifies young people's sense of floating, making the digital space, despite its high connectivity, compress the reality of on-site space and the sense of "nearby". Zhang (2024) also found that while social media provide channels for emotional expression and social engagement, the relationships they foster are highly fragmented and interactions superficial, exacerbating psychological emptiness and social alienation.

Therefore, under the combined influence of digital technology, structurally weakened connections, and psychological disorientation, the space of “nearby” is gradually dissolving. Although university campuses still retain physical space, the sense of presence no longer holds social meaning. Students are increasingly immersed in virtual connections and self-monitoring, losing delicate awareness of the relationships and environments around them. The absence of “nearby” is thus both a transformation in spatial organisation and a result of instability in emotional and relational logic. This context illustrates the process of de-localisation of space, as well as provides a realistic and theoretical foundation for the subsequent exploration of how students might reconstruct the experience of “nearby”.

2.4 Reconfiguration of “nearby” in Policy

“Nearby” is not simply a geographic space, but a form of everyday sociality formed through physical presence and repeated interactions. It sustains the continuity between people and places, and among communities. However, as a relatively new concept, “nearby” has not yet been systematically named or discussed in mainstream policy documents of the Chinese government. Nevertheless, driven by goals such as improving education quality, optimising living environments, and enhancing social trust, local governments in China are implementing a range of initiatives that contribute to the reconstruction of “nearby”. These policies offer a window to observe the reimagining and rebuilding of “nearby”.

The "15-minute living circle" has emerged in recent years as a key urban governance concept proposed by cities in China such as Shanghai. The term refers to an urban design where residents can access basic public services, such as daily necessities, education, healthcare, and leisure, within a 15-minute walk from their homes (Shanghai Municipal Bureau of Planning and Natural Resources, 2025). This concept was originally introduced to reduce carbon emissions, ease urban congestion, and achieve more efficient resource allocation. As the policy has been implemented, the "15-minute living circle" has gradually evolved from an environmental governance tool into a response to more complex social issues.

Two social contexts have become particularly prominent: first, the educational anxiety and spatial inequality caused by rising house prices near high-performing schools; second, the growing marginalization of community facility functions, which has weakened the structure of everyday social interactions among residents.

The phenomenon of rising prices for school district housing stems from the "neighbourhood-based school admission" policy implemented in China. This policy was originally intended to promote educational equity and a more rational distribution of resources by linking school enrolment eligibility to household registration or residential location (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2014). However, due to the extreme concentration of high-quality educational resources and regional development imbalances, many parents have chosen to purchase property in areas with access to better schools to secure improved educational opportunities for their children. This has driven a sharp increase in the price of school district housing, deeply entangling educational access with housing costs, and resulting in spatial inequality and class-based segregation (Peng et al., 2021). In addition, the popularity of school district housing has led to the marginalisation of community facilities such as cultural centres, libraries, and residents' activity rooms. These spaces, which once served as nodes of public life and social interaction, have gradually lost their communal function. This trend has further weakened urban residents' sense of space and belonging.

Based on this, the 15-minute living circle provides an institutional opportunity for the reconstruction of the "nearby". For example, Shenzhen's Special Plan for Basic Education Layout (2024–2035), released in 2024, explicitly proposes school placement according to the standard of "kindergartens within five minutes, primary schools within ten minutes, and junior secondary schools within fifteen minutes." This aims to ensure access to education and to alleviate the mismatch between housing and educational resources caused by cross-district school selection. At the same time, several administrative districts in Shanghai are piloting the construction of "15-minute community living circles", which integrate functional facilities such as education, culture, and healthcare. These initiatives

are reshaping the sociability of communities and creating new possibilities for everyday interaction.

In summary, existing studies on the evolution of “nearby” within urban contexts have offered valuable perspectives on spatial constraints experienced by young people, the transformation of traditional relational models, the intervention of digital media, and policy-level responses. However, much of this research remains situated at the level of macro-structural analysis or policy discourse, with relatively limited attention paid to young individuals’ subjective spatial perceptions and their processes of social relationship construction. In the Chinese context in particular, the coexistence and interplay of traditional differential association, modern institutional logics, and digital culture present both heightened complexities and potentialities in how university students understand and practise “nearby”. Moreover, while policies such as the “15-minute living circle” aim to compensate for the decline of public social spaces, the agency and lived experiences of young people within these frameworks remain insufficiently explored. It is therefore necessary to examine how “nearby” is perceived, reconstructed or even evaded by students within the constraints of institutional and media structures.

3. Research Design

This chapter outlines the operational design and methodological choices of the study. Adopting a qualitative approach, the research focuses on how participants perceive and reconstruct "nearby" within the routines of everyday life. Methodologically, the study takes an innovative approach by combining map drawing with semi-structured interviews, aiming to capture both the emotional dimensions and structural tensions embedded in spatial experience. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling, primarily via posts on social media platforms, targeting current students from various universities across Shanghai. Data analysis followed grounded theory procedures, employing open and axial coding to identify key concepts from the participants' perspectives and gradually develop an interpretive framework.

This chapter is organised as follows: it begins with a detailed account of data collection and analysis procedures, followed by a discussion of the study's philosophical orientation and methodological rationale. It then introduces the research setting and participant composition, and concludes with the ethical considerations and protective measures adopted throughout the research process.

3.1 Methodology

This study adopts an interpretivist qualitative research paradigm, which emphasizes how individuals construct meaning and experience within specific social contexts. Unlike positivist approaches that focus on causal relationships and universal laws, interpretivist research values subjective perspectives and seeks to understand how actors make sense of the world they live in. It is particularly well suited to exploring abstract and ambiguous social phenomena (Crotty, 1998).

The concept of "nearby" is not a fixed geographic unit. It is a socially constructed and dynamically changing space that holds different boundaries, interpretations, and emotional meanings in different individuals' lives. Therefore, "nearby" should not be treated as an objective entity. Instead, its existence should be understood through how people perceive, narrate, and engage with it. The goal of this study is

not to confirm an objective fact, but to explore how university students experience and relate to “nearby” in their daily lives.

3.1.1 Why Use Qualitative Research Methods

Given that the research focuses on the perception and practice of “nearby”, this study adopts qualitative methods. Qualitative research is well suited for exploring complex, fluid, and not fully structured questions. It emphasizes how individuals construct their world and make meaning of their experiences within specific contexts(Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Tisdell et al., 2025).

First, “nearby” is not a clearly defined analytical unit in social science, nor does it have stable measurement tools. Its very existence depends heavily on subjective experience. Qualitative research helps the researcher understand how this experience is perceived and interpreted in participants’ everyday lives. Moreover, the study examines participants’ internal understanding of space, emotional connections in social relationships, and tensions with digital technology. These aspects are usually difficult to capture through structured questionnaires. In contrast, qualitative methods offer space for open expression, allowing participants to describe events, processes, and feelings in their own words, thereby revealing how they construct the idea of “nearby”.

In addition, the disappearance or construction of “nearby” often takes the form of subtle behavioural changes or shifts in perception, rather than dramatic or event-based transformations. Qualitative research can capture these subtle, contradictory, or even unconscious processes of change. For example, a participant may not explicitly say “I feel “nearby” is disappearing”, but their avoidance of public spaces, reluctance toward offline interactions, or reliance on social media may indirectly reflect a transformation in their experience of “nearby”.

Although mixed methods can combine the breadth of quantitative data with the depth of qualitative insights in some social science studies, they are not suitable for this research. One reason is that the concept of “nearby” currently lacks a unified operational definition and has not yet developed into measurable

quantitative indicators. Creating surveys or scales without clear dimensions risks oversimplifying or misinterpreting participants' complex spatial experiences.

Another reason is that this study focuses on how individuals either lose or retain their sense of "nearby" within digitalized and institutionalized daily life. These experiences are highly diverse and context-specific. Mixed methods typically require researchers to establish fixed variable models and hypothesis structures at the beginning of the study. However, the goal of this research is to explore the diversity and generative logic of "nearby" in an open-ended way(Creswell & Clark, 2011).Using standardized questions would limit the ability to capture these diverse experiences and would make it difficult to identify subtle patterns of spatial change in practice.

3.1.2 Sampling Strategy

As one of the most internationally connected and representative metropolises in China, Shanghai stands at the forefront of the country's economic, social, educational, and cultural development. Located on the eastern coast of China at the estuary of the Yangtze River, the city covers a total area of approximately 6,340.5 square kilometres and consists of 16 administrative districts, including Pudong New Area, Xuhui, Huangpu, Hongkou, and Jiading. By the end of 2024, the city's permanent population had reached 24.8026 million, making it one of the most densely populated urban centres in China. Cultural activity in the city is notably vibrant, with a total of 896 exhibitions and public events held over the course of the year, covering more than 19.22 million square meters in exhibition space. These figures reflect the openness and diversity of Shanghai's public cultural infrastructure (Shanghai Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 2025). As a national hub of higher education and cultural production, the city is home to a range of internationally recognized universities and specialized institutions, such as Fudan University, Tongji University, East China Normal University, and Shanghai Theatre Academy. Its cultural life remains highly open and diverse.

For these reasons, selecting Shanghai as the primary field site of this study offers strong theoretical relevance and interpretive value. As one of the earliest cities in

China to undergo modernization and high-density urbanization, Shanghai is characterized by clearly defined functional zoning, fast-paced life rhythms, and a highly institutionalized governance system. These features are structurally at odds with the everyday, unplanned interactions that constitute “nearby”. In a social space where rational planning dominates nearly all aspects of urban life, the spontaneous and affective qualities of “nearby” face significant constraints. By contrast, in smaller cities or rural areas where elements of the traditional acquaintance society or kinship networks are still preserved, “nearby” may be more readily sustained through shared life experiences and familial ties. Studying the compression and reconstruction of “nearby” in Shanghai therefore offers both a representative and forward-looking case, and helps situate “nearby” as a concept within contemporary debates on urban governance and the lived experience of modernity.

Moreover, the concentration and diversity of higher education institutions in Shanghai provides a practical advantage for sample selection. From elite national universities such as Fudan, Tongji, and East China Normal, to art colleges and private institutions, the city hosts a wide range of student populations varying in social background, academic discipline, media use habits, and cultural preferences. This diversity enables the use of convenience sampling while ensuring the inclusion of cases that are both representative and analytically comparable. At the same time, the university campus itself is one of the most central and meaningful spaces in students’ everyday life, serving as a primary site for the formation of “nearby” experiences.

Finally, as a major centre for China’s cultural and creative industries, Shanghai is endowed with abundant public cultural resources and a pluralistic civic ecology. Beyond mainstream exhibitions, performances, and museum programs, the city also fosters a wide array of grassroots artistic events, sports communities, neighbourhood organizations, and volunteer initiatives. These informal and non-instrumental cultural activities not only enrich the social function of public space but also provide young people with real opportunities to establish flexible relationships and cultivate a renewed sense of social awareness. For the purposes

of this study, such a cultural foundation suggests that the remnants of “nearby” may not have entirely disappeared. Rather, they may have been partially revived through citizen-led cultural practices, even as they are compressed by formal institutional structures. By investigating whether and how university students participate in these cultural arenas, the study further explores the possibilities and pathways through which “nearby” can be reconstituted.

In summary, Shanghai is a feasible research site in practical terms, and offers a rich empirical setting to observe the tensions and possibilities of “nearby” in the lives of contemporary youth. Its combination of advanced urbanization and cultural diversity provides a valuable vantage point from which to examine the lived challenges and potential regeneration of “nearby” in modern urban life.

To capture rich and diverse spatial experiences, this study uses convenience sampling. Recruitment information was publicly posted on online platforms such as WeChat and Xiaohongshu, inviting undergraduate and master's students currently enrolled in Chinese universities to voluntarily participate in the study. Compared to other possible qualitative sampling strategies such as snowball sampling, snowball sampling may help quickly build trust networks but tends to produce convergence in spatial perception due to existing social ties(Gierczyk et al., 2023; Kirchherr & Charles, 2018).Therefore, convenience sampling was chosen based on its practical feasibility and the potential for a more dispersed and varied participant pool.

3.1.3 Rationale for Data Collection Methods

This study uses a mapping task drawn from art-based methods, aiming to guide participants to visually present their everyday spatial experiences. Compared with text-based methods such as interviews or open-ended questionnaires, mapping offers several advantages.

First, this method captures non-verbal and highly abstract forms of spatial perception(Banks, 2018). University students' understanding of “nearby” is often not directly expressed through language but exists through visual and spatial forms. Maps can visually represent the structure of space and the density of social

relations. Through the placement of locations, relative distances, distribution of people, and use of blank space, researchers can analyse how participants define the boundaries of “nearby” in daily practice, identify key areas of social interaction, and examine emotional connections. As a mode of expression that combines experiential and symbolic elements, drawing supports a broader interpretation of spatial experience.

Second, mapping involves low technical and linguistic barriers, encouraging participants to express themselves freely(Bagnoli, 2009). It is particularly effective in bringing out overlooked but meaningful spatial details from everyday life. Compared to writing or interview tasks, mapping is more open-ended and engaging, which can help reduce anxiety at the beginning of the research process and create a foundation for deeper interviews.

Following the mapping task, the study collects verbal data through one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Compared with structured or unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews are more suitable for guiding participants to speak freely while keeping the discussion focused on the core themes. The researcher prepares guiding topics such as everyday spatial use and social experiences to ensure a certain level of structural comparability across different participants. At the same time, each participant can choose their own sequence and emphasis during narration, which helps reflect their individualized understanding of “nearby” as closely as possible.

In addition, this method allows for deep interaction with the mapping materials. The researcher guides participants to explain their choices related to space, colour, strokes, and shapes on the map, gradually uncovering the underlying behavioural logic and emotional memory. This process creates a more layered interpretive space. The map functions as a situational trigger, helps to recall emotional memories and social experiences associated with space. Complementarily, the interview serves as a platform for meaning-making, enabling the researcher to discern the narrative logic underlying the visual representation.

3.2 Method

This study aims to explore whether “nearby” space is disappearing from the everyday lives of contemporary Chinese university students, and further examines the key social, cultural, and technological factors influencing this change. Using “nearby” as an analytical perspective, the research focuses on how university students perceive, use, and narrate the social spaces and related interaction experiences in their daily lives. Given that the research questions emphasize subjective experience, spatial perception, and social interaction, the study adopts a combination of art-based methods and semi-structured interviews for data collection, in order to capture students’ multidimensional understandings of the concept of “nearby”.

3.2.1 Research Participants and Sampling

The participants of this study are undergraduate and master's students currently enrolled in universities in Shanghai. As postgraduate admission in mainland China is primarily through recommendations from undergraduate institutions or the National Postgraduate Entrance Examination, the differences between undergraduates and master's students in terms of age, work experience, and family responsibilities are not substantial. Consequently, this study includes both these students to provide a more comprehensive representation of the student population in higher education. Participants are at least 18 years old, have basic Chinese language skills for expression and communication, and able to complete the interview and related art-based tasks. The study used convenience sampling to recruit participants, mainly through posting recruitment information on online platforms such as WeChat and Xiaohongshu, inviting eligible students to sign up.

The study recruited 15 participants. The sample size follows the qualitative research principle of data saturation, meaning recruitment will stop when information becomes repetitive and key themes are sufficiently represented (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Saunders et al., 2018). All participants took part in two main stages of the study after providing written and verbal informed consent: first, completing a hand-drawn mapping task to express their everyday

spatial experiences; second, participating in a one-on-one semi-structured interview to further explore their understanding and practice of “nearby” space.

In the actual recruitment process, the study attempted to include participants with different gender identities, academic levels, disciplinary backgrounds, and geographic locations, aiming to reflect a certain level of diversity within a limited sample. For example, some participants are from top universities, while others are from regular higher education background. Their academic backgrounds include psychology, philosophy, performance, law, business, medicine, and etc. Students from different backgrounds may have varied experiences in how they use campus spaces, build social interactions, and engage with media, providing a foundation for observing everyday spatial experiences from multiple perspectives.

3.2.2 Art-Based Method: Mapping Task

Before the formal interview, each participant independently completed a mapping task, which serves as the first step in data collection. The purpose of this task is to guide participants to reflect on and express their everyday spatial experiences through visual means. It also provides a concrete visual basis for the upcoming interview conversation.

The mapping task was assigned and submitted online. Participants can choose to draw by hand using pen and paper, or create digitally using tools such as a tablet. They will be asked to draw the area where they currently live or where they most frequently engage in daily activities. The drawing can take the form of a realistic street map or a symbolic layout. The focus is on showing their personal perception of everyday space. The map may include their own location, places they frequently visit, and people they interact with. They may also add arrows, colours, or shapes to express movement paths, levels of familiarity, or emotional tone. There is no requirement to include official place names or scale. Participants are free to create based on their own experiences and imagination.

The researcher informed participants that the map will not be judged or interpreted in advance and that there will be no evaluation based on how complete it appears. Then, the interviews were focused on elements such as the spatial

layout, colour use, shape placement, and drawing details. For example, the researcher may ask, “Why did you place this location at the centre of the map?”, “Is there any meaning behind the use of red here?”, “Why did you choose to draw this path as curved?”, or “This area is heavily shaded, does it relate to a particular memory or feeling?”. These questions aim to help participants revisit their experiences and offer deeper insight into how “nearby” is expressed in their everyday world.

All maps are kept with the informed consent of the participants and organized and analysed as part of the research data. The content of the maps and participant identities are strictly protected. All data are anonymized and stored for academic analysis only. No content will be used in public displays outside of research purposes.

3.2.3 Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews

After completing the mapping task, the study proceeded to one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted online and last around 45 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with the written and verbal informed consent of participants, to ensure both data integrity and compliance with research ethics.

The interview content focuses on these main themes: participants’ daily routines, real-life social interactions, use of digital media, and sense of social agency. The interviews primarily use open-ended questions, encouraging participants to share freely based on specific events, everyday situations, and personal feelings. The researcher may adjust the order and wording of the questions based on each participant’s map, making the conversation more aligned with their language and thinking styles.

This study places emphasis on the interaction between the mapping task and the interview. During the interview, the maps were used as a contextual prompt to help participants recall and describe memories related to the spaces, people, or symbols they included. This blending of text and image not only enriches the data but also expands the ways qualitative research can represent individual experience

(Bagnoli, 2009). It allows the abstract concept of "nearby" to be interpreted through vivid, concrete personal narratives.

The final stage of data analysis adopted the grounded theory approach. Based on systematic organization of both interview and art-based materials, the study will gradually build a conceptual framework. The goal is to generate patterns from the participants' narratives and images, in order to explain how the experience of "nearby" is constructed. The study aims to avoid imposing predefined frameworks and to ensure the explanatory power of its conclusions.

3.3 Ethical Consideration

As a qualitative study centred on subjective experience and dependent on interaction and expression, this research follows the *Best Practice Guidance* at the University of Oxford. The study ensures that participants' rights to respect, protection, and informed consent are upheld throughout the research process. Based on the specific methods and context of this study, the following sections outline the ethical measures taken, with reference to BPG items 01, 02, 06, 08, 09, 10, and 15.

In line with the Best Practice Guidance 01 on researcher boundaries and safety (Oxford University CUREC, 2025a), although this study is conducted through online interviews and allows for flexible participation, the safety and boundaries of the researcher remain a priority. All communications and interviews are conducted in private, safe, and disturbance-free settings to prevent technical or psychological intrusion. The researcher will not contact participants outside the scope of the study or through informal channels, in order to avoid developing asymmetrical or non-research-related relationships. The researcher also engages in reflective practice, conducting methodological reflections after each interview to maintain professional boundaries and ensure personal safety.

In accordance with the Best Practice Guidance 02, which emphasizes the ethical features of qualitative research (Oxford University CUREC, 2025b), this study places particular importance on informed consent. At multiple stages of the study—including recruitment, mapping, interview recording, and the use of

research findings—the researcher will clearly explain all relevant details. Formal research procedures will begin only after participants voluntarily sign written and verbal consent forms. Participants are fully informed of their rights, including the right to refuse to answer any question, to withdraw from the study at any time, and to request deletion of part or all of their data. The study does not use leading or suggestive questions, and participants' personal interpretations of the concept of "nearby" are fully respected. The researcher is also aware of potential power imbalances in the research relationship and adopts de-professionalized language to create an open and equal space for expression, in order to avoid the ethical risks of knowledge extraction.

According to the Best Practice Guidance 06 on conducting research in online settings (Oxford University CUREC, 2025c), the study recruits participants mainly through public posts on platforms such as Xiaohongshu and WeChat. These platforms are used in accordance with their user agreements and privacy policies. Recruitment posts follow principles of transparency and openness and avoid using language that may create inducement, such as offering incentives. All data collection takes place either through private messages on the platform or through private chats on WeChat, and communication is limited to research-related content. No personal information unrelated to the study is collected. Participants' submitted map drawings are used exclusively for research purposes.

In line with BPG 08 (Oxford University CUREC, 2025d), which offers guidance on addressing potential emotional risks, the study focuses on the perception and reconstruction of "nearby", which may involve emotional experiences such as loneliness, disconnection, or anxiety. Participants are informed that their involvement is entirely voluntary and that they may skip any question or withdraw from the study at any time without needing to provide a reason. During interviews, the researcher remains attentive to participants' emotional responses and avoids using language or questions that may provoke strong emotional reactions. If a participant shows signs of emotional distress, the interview will be paused. The participant will be given time to recover and asked whether they would like to continue.

Effective data management is a central ethical concern in this study, as outlined in the Best Practice Guidance 09 (Oxford University CUREC, 2025e). All map drawings, audio recordings, transcripts, and analytical notes are de-identified. Data files are stored using a coded system to ensure that names, contact information, or other identifiable details do not appear in the research materials. All data is stored in Microsoft OneDrive through university account. Data will be retained for up to one year after the end of the research project, after which all original materials will be permanently deleted using appropriate technical methods.

To ensure ethical practice during interviews, the study implements a clear and multi-step consent procedure, consistent with the expectations set out in BPG 10 (Oxford University CUREC, 2025f). This includes both a digitally signed consent form and verbal confirmation prior to the interview, guaranteeing that participants fully understand the process and their rights. The interviews are guided by open-ended questions and based on elements from participants' maps, allowing them to narrate their experiences in their own terms. At no point does the researcher impose predefined assumptions or make evaluative judgments on participants' responses.

Given the cross-cultural nature of the research context, attention has been paid to cultural appropriateness in line with BPG 15 (Oxford University CUREC, 2025g). Although the study is conducted by a researcher affiliated with a UK institution, data collection takes place among university students in China. The research strictly adheres to local social and cultural norms. It does not involve human tissue, medical subjects, or organizational partnerships. Before interviews begin, participants are clearly informed of the research background, institutional affiliation, and purpose of the study, ensuring they understand the broader research context.

This study aims to explore the spatial significance of "nearby" in the daily lives of contemporary university students and its reconstruction process. The study finds that although "nearby" has not entirely disappeared in students' subjective narratives, its internal dynamics deserve attention. At the macro level, the

combined effect of urban planning and the university system has left vast areas of "nearby" vacant, restricted within an order based on the tuantigeju. At the micro level, individuals still continue to construct relationships in the form of chaxugeju within a limited range, based on their own experiences. For example, they reconstruct a miniature, localised "nearby" space through emotional interactions with roommates, security guards, and local shopkeepers. This tension means that admittedly, "nearby" as a concept in daily experience remains vital, yet it is gradually compressed and fragmented at the level of spatial structure, making it difficult to grow freely.

4. Findings

Building on the methodological foundation established in the previous chapter, this chapter presents the main findings derived from map drawing and semi-structured interviews. Drawing on spatial representations and narrative accounts from 15 participants, the study identifies three interrelated thematic strands: the macro-level mechanisms of “nearby” compression, the micro-level spatial reconstruction of “nearby”, and the bearing of “nearby” risk.

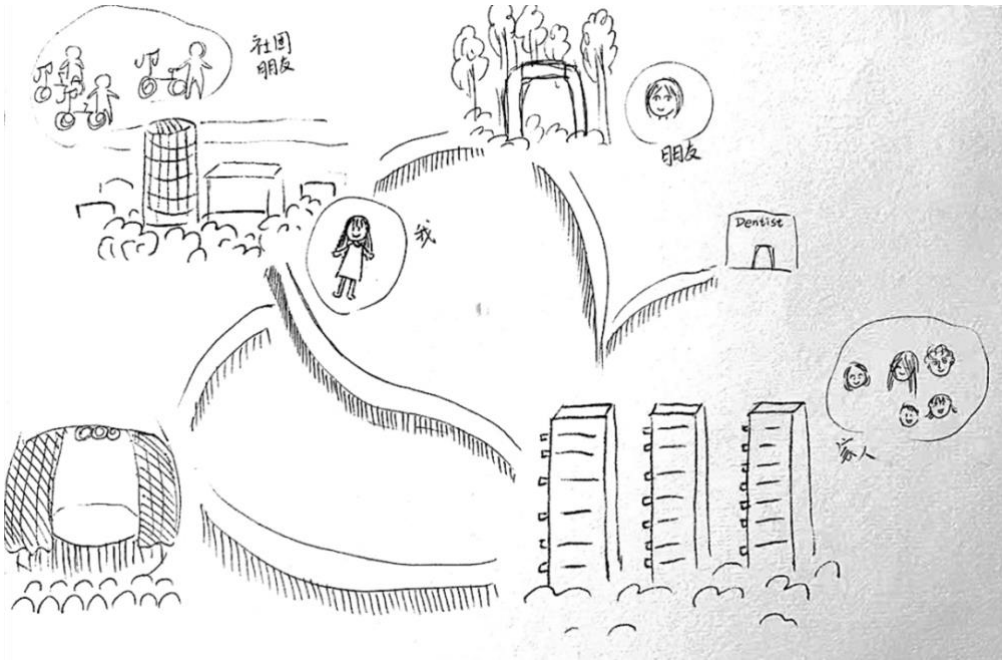
These themes reveal how university students gradually lose their spatial sensitivity to “nearby, while also demonstrating how they re-invest space with meaning through bodily presence, emotional engagement and relational practices. Departing from existing literature that largely centres on the impact of digital networks or youth psychology, this study foregrounds the micro-level experiences of students to portray “nearby” as a fluid and layered everyday space. In doing so, it highlights the forms and social significance of “nearby” in the lived realities of contemporary youth.

4.1 The Mechanism of “nearby” Failure in the Macro Structure

In this study, students’ hand-drawn maps and interview narratives together reveal a clear spatial characteristic: “nearby” does not exist as a continuous, fluid, and walkable social space, but rather presents a fragmented structure composed of functional nodes, passively connected by means of transportation. In order to describe this structure, the author proposes the "island-chain model" as an analytical framework for the daily spatial experiences of university students in Shanghai. Here, "islands" refer to highly functionalised, single-use, geographically isolated spatial nodes within or around the campus, such as dormitories, teaching buildings, canteens, metro stations, or shopping centres. The "chain" refers to the metro lines or shuttle buses that students rely on to temporarily link these isolated nodes in a leapfrogging manner to complete tasks or meet life needs. For instance, as shown in Figure 1, in the drawings of several interviewees, this island-chain structure appears, showing islands of life landmarks and linear commuting routes, but lacking transitional zones or spaces

without explicit functions. “nearby”, as a relational connection between people and space, people and people, is compressed into the shortest route between isolated points and destinations.

Figure1. A respondent's depiction of “nearby”, showing the “island-chain model”



This space structure dominated by functional nodes causes students' spatial perception to become highly fragmented. The spaces they use, perceive, and remember are often those with clear tasks and fixed routes, rather than organically grown environments for free exploration. For example, many interviewees attend universities that are geographically located at the edge of the city, far from central Shanghai’s main leisure and cultural areas. One interviewee described as below:

> *A: My university is located at the easternmost part of Shanghai, not in the city centre. It has no iconic buildings, even further than Disneyland. There aren’t many people around, so it feels like a new town. Shanghai probably wants to build it into something like Xiong’an New Area or a satellite city, but its development has been slow. The pace of life is more like an economic developing zone, with many factories. The workers here do not resemble the typical elite image of Shanghai.*
>
> *Q: How do you find the living experience here?*

A: For me, I don't like the typical Shanghai lifestyle, such as fast paced and elite, the whole person feels over-scheduled. I prefer to have my own quite little life. Now I'm very averse to constantly making efforts just for exams, to gain objective recognition. That's why I don't want to immerse myself in the school environment. The school is just for my residence, and it's too lonely, there are not many living facilities… The school is more like a place to rest where I temporarily study and live. If I want to refresh my mood on weekends, I'll go to Hongkou for a walk. But I don't really like the city centre, its atmosphere is very rigid and typical of Shanghai. I prefer places with many plane trees, where the trees are tall, and I can walk in between and enjoy my own little world. So, neither the school nor the city centre is my ideal living environment. My ideal place is like my hometown, where I can truly break and feel my own world.

This description reveals the functional outsourcing of university spaces under urban planning: universities are relocated to new areas or industrial parks at the urban periphery, far from central city life, traditional street textures, cultural atmosphere, and everyday scenes. At the same time, it shows the emotional rupture students experience in such spatial structures. Her school is not a community where she can gradually become familiar and rooted, but a functional base. She described the campus as a space for residence but not belonging. Although the city centre is accessible, she does not long for it, since its sense of elitism prevents her from feeling empathy or ease. Between these two extremes, her "nearby" does not naturally emerge but is entirely absent.

It is worth noting that this spatial fragmentation is not merely because "the city is too large" or "the distance is too far", but because these places themselves lack spatial continuity and mechanisms for emotional generation. The peripheral position of the city is compounded by its functional singularity, and her personal rhythm is thus embedded in a production mechanism: going for exams, commuting, achieving performance targets. What she resists is precisely this life system governed by efficiency and rationality. Even if she can move between city nodes, she still feels that "nearby" does not exist, and life cannot unfold.

In other words, this is a structure where space exists, but sociality is absent. The problem with the island is not that it is uninhabitable, but that it is planned to be only for residence and not for extension. The student cannot draw a true "nearby"

on her map not because she does not observe or perceive, but because these spaces never reserved room for the generation of relationships, memories, and emotions from the outset.

Corresponding to the structural isolation of the island, the "chain", that is the commuting route connecting functional nodes, seemingly provides spatial accessibility, but in essence, this connection is often enclosed. In this chain-dominated spatial practice, individuals' routes of movement are compressed into fixed, task-oriented lines, for instance, from dormitory to metro station, from metro to school, then back home. The path is clear and repeatable, but during this process, space serves merely as the background for movement, not a place for dwelling or perception. This path structure relies on a rational spatial logic co-constructed by the urban rail system and the university system, where space is traversable but not perceptible. Students become familiar with their routes through daily commutes, yet remain detached from any concrete experience of space.

In this structure, the chain does not truly extend students' daily life radius but rather compresses "nearby" into a series of shortest paths between fixed stations by excluding the areas outside the route. Against this backdrop, university students become increasingly unfamiliar with the spaces outside the path, even perceiving them as blank zones, and lack the motivation or desire to enter or explore them. This spatial experience is vividly illustrated in interviewee narratives as below:

> *A: There's literally nothing at my university, so I drew it very small. Next to my university is a railway, with a pedestrian bridge to the metro station. The surrounding area is barren, and there's nothing at all.*
>
> *(Switching to another map) This is the place from my high school, but clearly it's not as detailed as the last one. Back then I just went to school and work, and I wouldn't wander around "nearby". This is the school where I did my internship. Next to the school is a tunnel, and I don't know where the tunnel leads. My commuting route is from the metro station near my home to this metro station, then I take a bus to my school.*
>
> *Next to the school is a botanical garden. Further up there are more schools and a university. Next to that university is another metro*

> *station. I marked an M milk tea shop here because there are no other shopping areas near my school, and I spend the most money at this one. Actually, there's also a Y milk tea shop and a coffee chain before that. But I go to this one the most, so I drew it in.*

In this account, spatial organisation is clearly compressed into a functional map, containing only commuting routes, key nodes, and frequent consumption points. She can clearly describe her route: leaving home, taking the metro, transferring to a bus, and reaching her school. She also remembers the milk tea shop where she consumes most. Apart from that, her spatial memory is fragmented: "I don't know where the tunnel leads", "I don't wander around", "there's really nothing". All of which indicate that space lacks attraction for her and, more importantly, lacks the possibility for generating relational life. This kind of spatial cognition that knowing the route but not the environment is not accidental, but the result of the linearity of the chain.

In this structure, the commuting path itself becomes the only viable choice. Although it seems based on convenience and the extensive transport system, it segments the infinite possibilities of spatial experience into linear and limited choices. The interviewee chose to mark the M milk tea shop, rather than drawing the details of the street, showing that her spatial cognition is driven by purpose. Even though there are other shops along the street, she only marked the one she frequents the most, revealing a frequency-based memory mechanism. In other words, whether a space is perceived no longer depends on its geographical position or cultural atmosphere, but on its utility in the chain of daily life.

The problem with the chain is not whether it links islands, but that the way it connects is too linear, enclosed, and singular, causing the relationship between individuals and space to lose its generative and accidental qualities. In this sense, even if a student shuttles across cities every day, knowing each route step by step, she may still know nothing about the streets, shops, people, and environments along the way. The chain, therefore, forms another kind of suppression of the experience of "nearby".

Interviewees' narratives also show that university students' daily time structure is deeply reconstructed by urban planning, especially in Shanghai where universities

are located far from the core city area and rail transport bears the burden of commuting. Time itself loses continuity. One interviewee mentioned that compared to her hometown, her time in Shanghai "has been both lengthened and shortened". Several interviewees commute more than two hours a day, "A commute under one hour is considered close". This is not just an adaptation to urban scale, but a reconstruction of time-space perception. More importantly, when students become accustomed to spending large amounts of time on arrival and departure, life turns into a sequence of destinations rather than a process of lingering, extending, or dwelling. The social meaning of time shifts from being freely allocated living time to being functionally organised around task goals.

This change in time perspective also reinforces spatial functionality. Outside the commuting path, individuals are unwilling to spend time understanding or exploring because in their experience, “going off-track” means greater unpredictable consumption. Therefore, the fragmentation of time and space is not two parallel phenomena but a mutually embedded, jointly operative dual process: spatial rupture leads to temporal discontinuity, while passive segmentation of time further reinforces the compressed use of space. In this way, “nearby” is not only evacuated geographically, but also excluded from temporal perception.

In addition, even if space permits and time is sufficient in modern daily practice, relationships themselves may lack the conditions for continuity and accumulation. One interviewee mentioned that her interaction with the canteen auntie was limited to "just a few seconds" because "today it is this auntie, and tomorrow it might be another". This kind of relationship brevity and functionality reflects a fragmentation of social roles between people under institutional division of labour.

This condition can be understood through Marx’s theory of *alienation*. In a highly divided and institutionalised spatial structure, human contact is no longer a social practice based on emotion or understanding but becomes an instant functional interface. Individuals no longer meet each other as complete social beings, but appear briefly as abstract roles executing a function (Marx, 1844/2016). This signifies the disappearance of “nearby”, and further illustrates individuals’

estrangement from their own sociality. They keep performing functions in the social field yet increasingly struggle to find true social connection within it.

In conclusion, the dissolution of “nearby” space in students’ daily lives is not incidental, but a process shaped by multiple structural mechanisms. At the level of physical space, cities and campuses are segmented by islands and chains. Daily routes are highly functional and nodal, lacking transitional spaces and social possibilities. At the level of temporal structure, long commutes divide life into fragmented intervals, compressing non-functional time resources like wandering and chance encounters. At the level of social relationships, the strengthening of social division has not created emotional connections as in Durkheimian organic solidarity (Durkheim, 1893/2023), but presents instead a Marxian alienation: interactions become brief and functional, and the connection between the individual and others, and with their social self, is continually withdrawn.

These mechanisms from different dimensions are nested and coordinated within the institutional logic of life at universities in Shanghai, and reinforced by the form of tuantigeju. In other words, tuantigeju not only shapes the purpose of action but implicitly disciplines the reasonableness of life, further eroding the potential of “nearby” as a relational, open, and generative space. In this macro institutional logic, “nearby” is not forgotten, but structurally abolished.

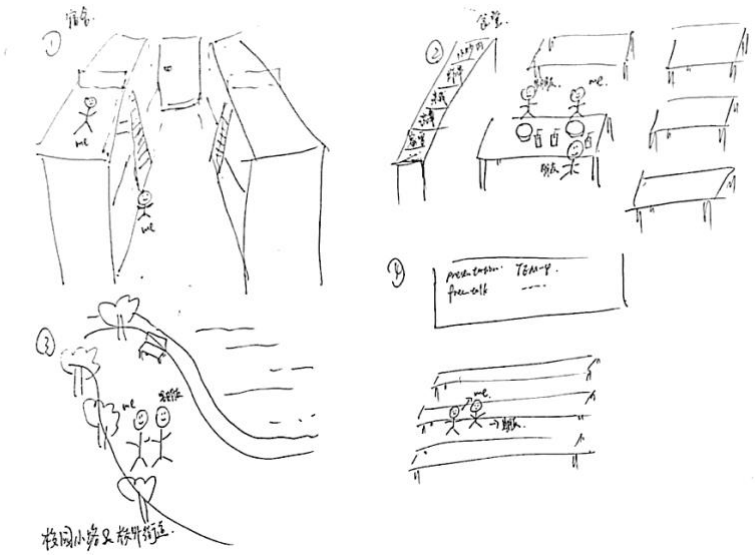
4.2 Chaxugeju: The Micro Reproduction of “nearby”

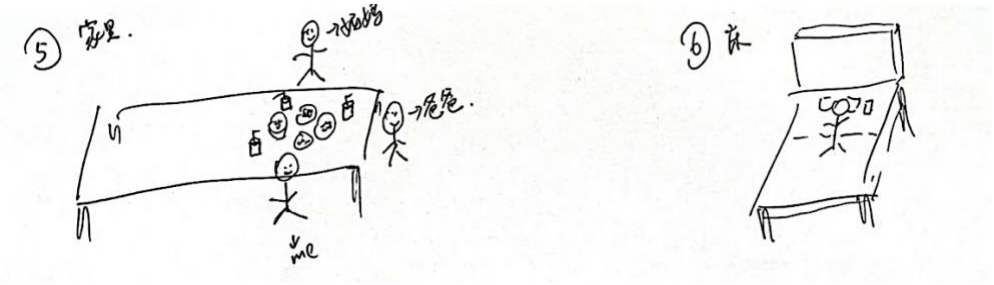
In the interview data of this study, students' ways of addressing campus staff display a culturally meaningful habit: all respondents referred to canteen staff as "canteen aunties" and security guards as "security uncles". These forms of address are not merely colloquial linguistic habits but reflect a micro-level social cognition under the modern educational system and Chinese cultural context. Linguistically, they form a compound expression that combines occupational identity (“canteen staff”) with kinship terms (“auntie”), concretising institutional roles while imbuing standardised, hierarchical employment relations with a kin-like ethical dimension.

Unlike Western conventions, which commonly use surnames with titles or professional labels, Chinese students extend the logic of chaxugeju in these terms of address. That is, organising social relations in concentric circles with the self at the centre, using kinship language to build familiarity and informal order. Within the highly institutionalised setting of the campus, such forms of address function as a culturally embedded micro-adjustment mechanism, allowing structured, emotionless service relations to regain a degree of human warmth and accessibility in students' daily discourse. In other words, "auntie" and "uncle" are not just polite terms, but social markers of recognition. In the students' minds, these staff members often hold a dual symbolic position: both as role performers within the university's management system and as familiar, elder-like figures. This dual projection exemplifies how chaxugeju continues to persist and reproduce within contemporary institutional settings.

Chaxugeju is also manifested in students' drawing strategies. Some participants did not adopt panoramic spatial layouts in their maps but constructed scene-based narratives based on relational intensity and familiarity (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. A scene drawing of a respondent (in sequence: dormitory, dining hall, campus path, classroom, home and bedroom)





Unlike other respondents who mostly drew maps in a bird's-eye view using functional landmarks, this interviewee's drawings resemble a set of life comics. She did not attempt to depict a complete spatial network or transport logic, but divided life into several scenes characterised by strong relational and emotional resonance: dormitory, canteen, walking by the lake, classroom, family dining table, and bedroom. Each image includes the presence of the interviewee herself and familiar others. This strategy shows that her understanding of life is based on events and relationships rather than macro structures or institutional pathways. Her perception of "nearby" is anchored in familiarity, relational density, and emotional connection.

This method of drawing reflects the underlying logic of chaxugeju in micro life. According to Fei Xiaotong's theory, chaxugeju organises human relationships in concentric circles centred on the self. The interviewee's drawing follows a similar logic: whether a space is included in the map depends on whether it holds familiar social relations; and expressions of those relations are not based on institutional roles but on emotional symbols and interactive experiences. Though her drawing lacks spatial continuity, it is rich in relational density. Her "nearby" is not absent, but has been locally and differentially reconstructed into a set of shared social scenes.

Against the backdrop of increasingly functionalised campus spaces, the internet has become an important tool for university students to maintain intimate relationships. However, online platforms tend to attach themselves to pre-existing social ties, serving to extend or compensate for existing connections. One interviewee shared her experience with a roommate she met during a volunteer event as below:

> *"I previously went to the northeast for a volunteer forum. It was my first time there. My new roommate was accidentally from the northeast. We stayed together for five days, though she left after three. I prefer offline communication. Long-term communication via social media feels exhausting to me, that is physically and mentally draining. Many people love online interaction, but I speak more during in-person conversations. That night we got along well immediately. We shared everything and deeply resonated with each other. She said, 'Let's meet once every six months, because I don't want to lose you as a friend.' Since we both knew that without face-to-face interaction, people naturally drift apart. Now we often talk on WeChat. I'm the kind of person who wishes others wouldn't send me messages, but I still chat with her a lot. I also get on well with my parents, but at school there's a long distance between us…"*

This experience illustrates how the sense of "nearby" is generated through face-to-face interaction and later sustained through digital communication. Although the respondent clearly expresses fatigue with prolonged online interactions, when physical space is inaccessible, digital tools like WeChat become emotional media for maintaining key relationships. This shows that in digital space, "nearby" can function as a mechanism for the reproduction of relationships based on chaxugeju. The internet does not create entirely new modes of interaction, but extends the life span of existing relationships. In the face of increasingly segmented institutional spaces, it serves as a backup support for intimacy, though the sense of "nearby" still largely stems from embodied experience and emotional trust accumulated in offline co-presence.

From the perspective of chaxugeju, an individual's sense of belonging and "nearby" is never purely spatial, but a form of social positioning embedded in concrete relational networks. In this structure, closeness is not determined by physical distance but by emotional density and ethical hierarchy. As one interviewee said:

> *"I feel like I don't really belong to a place, but I might feel a sense of belonging to my grandparents, or to that very close friend of mine—I feel belonging more from emotional connections."*

In her account, belonging does not correspond to a specific geographic location but depends on interpersonal geographies built from kinship and deep emotional ties. This continues the logic of chaxugeju: in modern society, space does not

precede relationships, but is shaped and defined by them. She further explains: "Most of my online interactions are also based on people I know offline… because they give me a sense of belonging offline, I feel the same online." This indicates that "nearby" in digital space is essentially an emotional inertia projected from offline experiences, rather than a spatial structure produced by the platform itself. What the internet maintains is an emotional axis centred on kinship, locality, or intense shared experience, continuing the individual's internal ranking of relational depth within chaxugeju.

Yet, digital platforms are not merely an extension of chaxugeju, they subtly shift its boundaries. In online spaces, strangers who are otherwise far from one's relational centre are no longer excluded due to geographic or social distance. Instead, algorithmically curated interest clusters and information flows include such others in emotionally resonant communities. As one interviewee described as follows:

> *"The beauty of social media is that the kindness of strangers is very heart-warming. In some social incidents, what they've said online gives me hope. People also share lovely, heart-warming things from faraway. They may not be in the same space/time as me, and it feels magical. Sharing modest joys makes me feel at ease, like having interesting friends within ten metres. Scrolling through such content is great entertainment for me. When you're stuck in one place studying or living, you feel bored, as if each day is copy-pasted. It's unbearable. I even read shampoo bottle instructions while going to the toilet if I don't have any information input. I must consume information, and I don't know if it's good or bad."*

This passage clearly demonstrates how social media produces a sense of proximity through temporal and spatial dislocation. A stranger, originally outside one's social circle, may feel emotionally close simply because they share a cute moment or similar feeling. Platform algorithms here disrupt the traditional order of chaxugeju based on kinship or familiarity, allowing strangers brief but real emotional embedding.

At the same time, the interviewee's need for information intake reveals how digital content plays a basic role in young people's everyday lives. It served as entertainment as well as a mechanism to reignite sensory awareness when time is

compressed and daily rhythms become homogeneous. The small detail of reading a bottle label suggests a deep-seated desire for novelty, change, and connection—fulfilled structurally by the fluidity of unfamiliar content online.

Therefore, while chaxugeju continues to govern familiar relationship networks, digital platforms use other mechanisms such as location-based recommendations and stranger-familiarisation to construct a temporary “nearby”. This “nearby” is jointly generated by algorithms, emotion, and imagination. It disrupts the traditional sequencing of closeness and allows individuals to feel socially comforted and connected amid relational fractures and fragmented time.

4.3 The Emotional Tensions and Contemporary Risks of “nearby”

Although the tuantigeju structure established by modern university systems is often viewed as an overly rational form of management that undermines the emotional fabric of “nearby”, in practice, tuantigeju does not necessarily lead to its erasure. On the contrary, structural inequalities within institutional systems can sometimes provoke emotional responses from students. In one interview, a respondent recounted as follows:

> *"Previously at our university, the cleaning aunties were not living in good conditions: they could only rest in the basement, which was cramped and stuffy. Later, some students voiced their concerns, and the university built a dedicated rest room for the aunties. I believe that people are equal, and they also have the equal right to rest. As law students, we may be more sensitive to such issues. Plus, since we have a large number of female students, everyone cares a lot about women’s rights."*

In this account, emotional ties of “nearby” did not arise from intimacy in familiar interactions nor from the ethical assumptions of chaxugeju. Rather, they emerged from visibility, moral recognition, and identification with public justice within a system based on tuantigeju. The students and the cleaning staff were institutionally distant, but this spatial and structural gap activated a moral response from students. Thus, emotion moved away from private relationality and towards public ethical concern grounded in gender awareness and professional identity.

This shows that even within tuantigeju, individuals possess the capacity to generate "nearby", particularly when inequalities become visible and transform into public issues. Concern for strangers emerges, and institutional spaces are re-signified with new ethical meanings. In other words, "nearby" can be through co-residence or kinship as well as awakenings in public life and practices of micro-politics.

Similar practices of "nearby" reconstruction are not limited to formal university institutions but can also be triggered in broader tuantigeju contexts through individual agency. Another interviewee shared her experience of building new relationships through a "*travelling journal'* activity she initiated online:

> *Q: When did you last meet new friends?*
>
> *A: When I was doing 'travelling journal'. I launched a travelling journal with about a dozen participants. Initially, I just wanted to buy an notebook and have others join me in decorating it, and I was not expecting to form any friendships. But when I saw their contributions, I was surprised by how much they liked the idea and wanted to keep it going.*
>
> *Q: How does the travelling journal work? A: Since I started it, I bought the notebook and call for participants via Xiaohongshu. I reviewed their painting styles, and if I like it, I added the person to an online group. People across the country would draw their part and mail the notebook to the next participant, following a pre-planned route. Eventually, it would return to me.*

This seemingly light, interest-based social interaction reveals how individuals can reconfigure relational networks via online platforms outside of physical proximity or familiar social networks. Although the organiser had no initial intention of forming connections, she gradually discovered the group's emotional resonance through continuous object circulation and shared aesthetic appreciation. Despite the group's temporary nature and lack of enduring interaction, the project fostered a subtle but real form of sociality. It suggests that even under impersonal tuantigeju structures, individuals can digitally craft encounters with a sense of "nearby". The significance lies not in inherited spatial or kinship ties but in mutual respect, emotional surprise, and the shared rituals of co-creation.

This illustrates that “nearby” may persist as residual familiarity or emerge anew through object circulation and meaning-making. These emotionally co-present, non-hierarchical collectives show that tuantigeju does not necessarily lead to indifference, instead it may also provide a structure for reweaving “nearby”.

However, in a context saturated with consumer culture and digital media, “nearby” within tuantigeju is also being reshaped into a de-experienced, visualised hyperreality. As Baudrillard (1994) argues, hyperreality is not a reflection of reality but a self-replicating system of signs and representations: it simulates and replaces the real, ultimately rendering the real unrecognisable. One interviewee described a fading sense of reality: “It’s just audio and visual stimulation. I’ve seen too much. I even feel the real world looks fake."

This is not fatigue with specific events, but the collapse of perception itself. Within a hyperreal space shaped by social media and consumerist urban scenes, individuals are surrounded by images, tags, and visual symbols. Reality no longer refers to lived experience but becomes a combination of signs. In this structure, individuals lose their sensory engagement with “nearby”; everyday life becomes the consumption of representations. Visiting a place is not to experience it but to produce a shareable photo. Exhibitions are not visited out of interest but to acquire symbolic capital.

Guy Debord’s theory (2012) of the society of the spectacle further explains this collective structure: in such societies, all social relations are mediated by images, and human connection is sustained not through action or interaction but through being seen. Another interviewee questioned the affective power of urban consumption as below:

> *"There are many things I want to try, but does consumption really bring that much happiness? I don’t think so. I’m not really into art and don’t really understand it, though I sometimes want to visit popular exhibitions. Then I question whether this kind of consumption is necessary. Some trendy shops are fun but expensive. Netizens even criticise them as scams. Do I really need to consume in this way to gain happiness?"*

This is not merely doubt about price or content, but about the entire emotional linkage mechanism of consumption. In the society of the spectacle, even happiness becomes a standardised, expressible, and recognisable indicator, that is a visible performance to be acknowledged. Meanwhile, genuine emotional experience, relational depth, and spatial connection are squeezed between visual expression and symbolic consumption.

Ultimately, young people are caught in a tension: they long for connection but encounter emptiness in the spectacle; they seek a sense of “nearby” but are pushed into a system built from hyperreal images and standardised experiences. In this structure, “nearby” becomes not a tangible, embodied, and social space but a manufactured and doubtful illusion.

This constitutes the emotional risk within tuantigeju today: while algorithms and spectacles make connection easier, sustaining relationships becomes harder. Individuals are immersed in fleeting and fragmented social moments, yet find it increasingly difficult to anchor themselves in enduring, present interactions.

Ulrich Beck (1992) mentioned in *Risk Society* that modern society’s core conflict lies not in the distribution of wealth but in the production and redistribution of risk. Environmental, social, and psychological risks are often the by-products of modernisation and institutionalisation, outsourced and transferred to ordinary individuals.

From the perspective of risk society, university students’ “nearby” experiences expose a mechanism of risk redistribution: modernisation has not only brought material wealth but has also produced and outsourced multiple risks, such as environmental, relational, and psychological. First, the "island-chain model" of spatial organisation reflects environmental risk: campuses are often far from the city centre, so the greenbelt, non-industrial spaces or even some infrastructures are hard to access for the students. While white collars residing in city centres enjoy the conveniences brought by urbanisation. However, students and blue collars whose voices are comparatively marginalised and have been pushed to the peripheries by urban planning, are forced to bear the inconveniences of

modernisation. Compared with other small cities in China, living in the outskirts of a big city like Shanghai means giving up the right to enjoy a better natural environment, while also not experiencing the economic prosperity brought by Shanghai as an economic centre. Instead, one merely faces higher prices and longer commutes. For example, one interviewee noted that an hour-long commute in Shanghai is considered close, which expands passive waiting time and shifts risk onto physical and psychological endurance.

Secondly, the intertwining of chaxugeju and tuantigeju has led to relational and psychological risk imbalances. Interactions are compressed into brief functional encounters. For example, conversations with canteen aunties last only seconds. Meanwhile, consumer spectacle and digital hyperreality heighten the risk of emotional voids—students constantly consume but rarely experience authentic belonging or trust. Though temporary digital "nearby" provides solace, emotional overload and algorithmic targeting may deepen isolation and emptiness.

Overall, these fragmented spaces, disjointed times, and disconnected networks constitute the normal landscape of risk in students' daily lives. Environmental inaccessibility, temporal fragmentation, and relational alienation are all outsourced onto individuals through institutional and consumer structures. "nearby", originally a site of connection and belonging, is thus divided and instrumentalised. Risk becomes a daily condition. Under these circumstances, reconstructing "nearby" involves spatial and temporal reorganisation, along with an ongoing struggle for emotional trust and social responsibility.

5. Discussion

“nearby” is an analytical concept that has been proposed and gradually developed in recent years within Chinese sociology. Unlike the traditional notion of community, which is often based on geographic proximity, kinship or blood ties, ”nearby”emphasises a boundary-less, micro-level and everyday form of social relations. However, within the existing theoretical framework, understandings of its generative mechanisms, the influence of perceptual subjects, and the logic of perception remain underdeveloped.

This chapter revisits the theory of ”nearby” and attempts to engage in a critical discussion and theoretical supplementation from two core dimensions. First, drawing on the perspective of ecofeminism, it highlights the neglect of non-human elements, such as the natural environment, animals, and plants, in current theories of ”nearby”, and explores how emotional connections to nature participate in the formation of ”nearby” in young people's spatial experiences. Second, it reflects on how the replication of Western modern university models within China’s higher education system has resulted in an institutional compression of young people’s spatial experience. On this basis, it discusses the theoretical adaptability and local challenges that the concept of ”nearby” faces within the Chinese context. The aim of this chapter is to deepen the conceptual understanding of ”nearby”, and propose directions for expanding its theoretical scope and applicability as an analytical tool.

5.1 The Overlooked Natural “nearby”: An Ecofeminist Perspective

5.1.1 Conceptual Framework of “nearby”

Xiang defines “nearby” as a highly dense social network and everyday interaction space derived from geographical proximity (Xiang & Kang, 2023). In his account, “nearby” is not equivalent to physical nearness but is a social field nested with social interactions, trust, and life order, maintained through ongoing exchanges.

Within this theoretical framework, Xiang emphasises the importance of relationships, particularly focusing on how the density of such relationships is

disrupted by modernisation, digitalisation, and spatial segregation, and how people strive to rebuild “nearby”. However, this analysis primarily concentrates on changes in networks and the social construction of spatial order, with limited discussion on the role of the natural environment or non-human others in the perception and reconstruction of “nearby”.

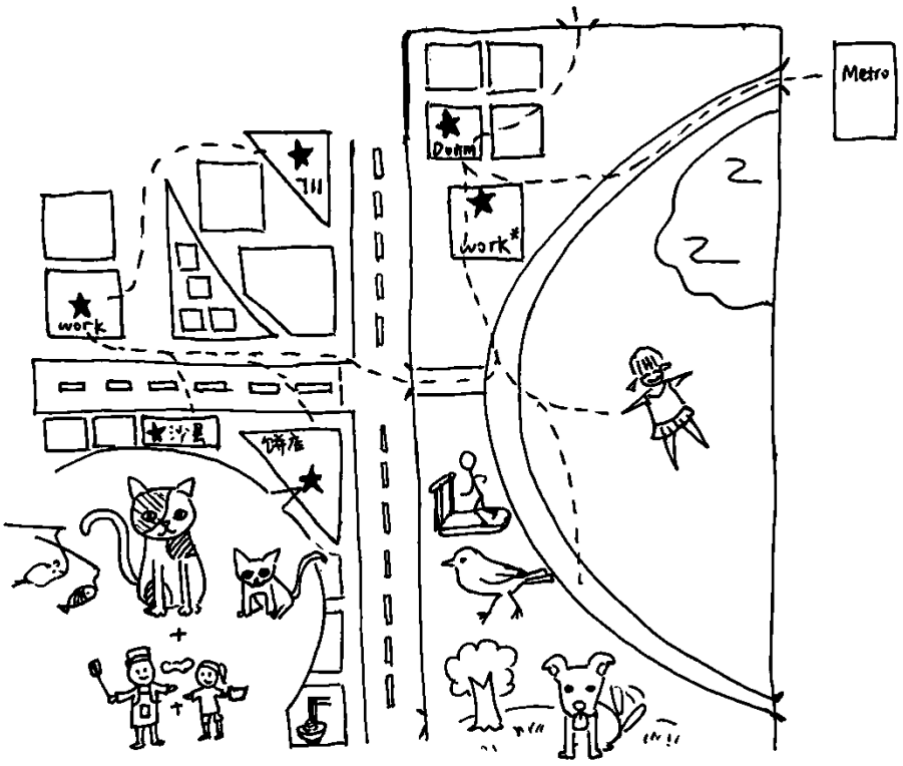
For this reason, when applying the concept of “nearby” to the spatial perception of contemporary university students, it is necessary to reflect on its anthropocentric tendency. The “nearby” perceived and constructed by young individuals in contemporary educational and urban spaces may encompass not only interactions between people but also emotional relationships with non-human lives. Especially in this study, many respondents, particularly female students, highlighted the significance of natural elements in their daily experiences during map drawing and interviews, prompting us to incorporate the ecological dimension into the redefinition of “nearby”.

5.1.2 Natural Elements in Female Respondents' Drawings

In this study, many female respondents explicitly included animals, plants, and green spaces as essential components of their daily life when describing their “nearby”, while the male respondents didn’t mention that. This tendency goes beyond the traditional definition of “nearby” as a space of networks or social relationships, revealing an emotional connection that transcends species and subject-object binaries:

> *"The large square on the right is part of the campus, because the ecological environment of campus is quite good. Basically, when it comes to the other parts of the campus, I will go there to watch birds, exercise, or watch people walking their dogs... And there is the pancake shop with two lovely cats. My junior and I go there every day just to play with the cats and feed them. (See Figure 3)"*

Figure 3. The "nearby" of a respondent, showcasing a vast amount of nature



"I really like the auntie at the pet shop because she is really kind-hearted. There are a lot of stray cats and dogs and I feel very sad seeing those abandoned animals. But I witnessed how the auntie gradually nursed them back to health. What matters most to me is that she made me love animals even more, and now I am seriously considering getting involved with the pet industry or public interest services related to animal law."

"My love for unfamiliar animals far exceeds that for unfamiliar humans. I am a loyal dog lover. There are many cats in our campus, but I prefer the enthusiastic dogs that would rush towards me. If I meet a stranger walking a dog, I will definitely try to talk to them and ask if I can pet the dog, and then we will start a conversation. Animals are very important to me."

"An elderly man who manages our campus recycling station once brought his golden retriever to school. Every time students went to throw out the rubbish, they would pet and play with the dog.

Unfortunately, the university prohibited him from bringing the dog because of safety concerns, and many students felt very sad about it."

These accounts clearly indicate a trend: “nearby” is not merely a space within a social structure, but a vital field where young women establish daily interactions and emotional connections with non-human lives. In the respondents' maps and narratives, cats, dogs, birds, and animal-related community spaces such as pancake and pet shops, and recycling stations function as emotional anchors. These places are not purely functional, they serve as nodes for daily stability, intimate connections, social identification, and even reflections on life direction.

Moreover, dogs in particular act as a kind of social lubricant, easing the sense of estrangement between humans and facilitating interaction. The university's action of excluding dogs from public space reflects the institutional suppression of non-functional intimate relationships and indirectly diminishes the emotional density and interaction opportunities within “nearby”. This is not merely a matter of human-animal relationships but also a structural issue of what types of relationships are allowed to exist in institutional spaces.

5.1.3 Interpretation from the Perspective of Ecofeminism

The spatial experiences shown in respondents' “nearby” maps and narratives have profound theoretical relevance to the core ideas of ecofeminism. Ecofeminists argue that the modern Western knowledge system constructs the human-nature relationship through a patriarchal dualistic logic, such as culture versus nature, humans versus animals, men versus women, and uses this to establish a structure of domination (Plumwood, 1993). In this structure, nature and women are positioned as controlled, domesticated, and cared-for objects, deprived of subjectivity and agency.

Plumwood (1993) systematically criticised the logic of mastery dualisms in the Western philosophical tradition. She pointed out that in male-dominated rational discourse, nature is simplified into mechanical systems or resource objects, stripped of its complexity and moral status. Women, due to their association with nature, bodies, and emotions, are further marginalised in this logic. This structural

connection causes women and nature to coexist in oppression, and explains why women tend to form emotional and intimate connections with non-human others as well.

The respondents' narratives precisely confirm this cross-species emotional logic: what they value in “nearby” is not control and efficiency but comfort, care, gentle response, and moral resonance. This is a powerful rebuttal to the abstract, utilitarian, and one-dimensional spatial logic.

Merchant (1980) further argued that the objectification of nature since the scientific revolution was not a neutral technical advancement but a deep cultural transformation that turned nature from Mother Nature into a machine. This transformation simultaneously expelled nature and women from the centre of social life, depriving them of discourse and rights. However, in the respondents' spatial practices, nature continues to exist tenaciously: it is not a silent background but a proximate being co-living with the subject.

Therefore, ecofeminism provides a crucial theoretical path for understanding how women, through their cohabitation experiences with nature and non-human animals, construct a counter-hegemonic spatial ethic in everyday life. This ethic is not a romanticisation of nature, nor does it essentialise women as more caring about nature, but rather a political reaction triggered under the oppression of social structure.

5.1.4 Redefining “nearby”

Returning to Xiang's concept of “nearby”, its original definition is based on geographical proximity and emphasises the density and trust mechanisms of networks in a familiar society. However, based on the above empirical and theoretical analysis, we can see that “nearby” is not a closed container of human social relationships but an open spatial structure of multi-species symbiosis. It includes human interactions and emotions as well as daily connections with nature, animals, and plants, bearing the potential for emotional solace and the construction of subject identity.

More importantly, in contemporary urban and institutionalised campus spaces, when relational structures become abstract, functional, and fragmented, nature and non-human others instead become stable, sincere, and non-instrumental emotional carriers. The presence of small animals is no longer an accessory to life but becomes an essential node for many university students to locate the self, establish rhythms, and perceive the world in their daily lives.

Therefore, we can propose an expanded definition of “nearby”: it is not merely a socially adjacent space in terms of geography or a reproduction site of stable relationships in familiar societies, but a complex space interwoven with human and non-human lives, cultural emotions and ecological ethics, institutional structures and everyday resistance. In this sense, “nearby” should be reinterpreted as a life field co-constructed by society and nature, whose significance lies not only in who is around me but also in what relationships, what emotions, and what species constitute the everyday world.

5.2 “nearby” Under Institutional Construction: The Tension Between Modern Higher Education and Local Culture

5.2.1 The Global Template and Modernisation Logic in Higher Education

China's contemporary higher education system has been significantly influenced by the logic of global templates. Since the Reform and Opening-Up, particularly under the implementation of policies such as "211," "985," and "Double First-Class", Chinese universities have extensively adopted academic evaluation systems, research-oriented management mechanisms, teaching quality indicators, and performance appraisal systems dominated by Western models. This so-called modernised institutional design reflects the global trend of convergence in higher education governance, underpinned by an ideal of rationalisation, abstraction, and standardisation.

Blanco (2023) mentioned that global templates are a seemingly universally applicable yet highly abstract and disembedded institutional logic. Their implementation is often mistakenly perceived as neutral and technical policy choices, overlooking the existing cultural structures and institutional practices of

the target society. Especially in higher education, the transplantation of global templates tends to prioritise efficiency, performance, and international rankings over local culture, emotional space, or daily life. Similarly, in the aspect of comparison education, this paradigm is conducive to international comparisons and policy promotion, but it often masks cultural differences and historical backgrounds, and promotes the homogenisation of educational systems (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021; Marginson & Mollis, 2001).

This modernisation process can also be understood from the perspective of state governance. Scott (2020) put forward that modern states tend to simplify the complex and diverse social realities to enhance visibility and control. This simplification is realised through standardised data, hierarchical systems, spatial planning, and technical mechanisms, but at the cost of suppressing local knowledge and experience. If the state achieves spatial visibility through simplification, then in higher education, this simplification manifests in the structural normalisation of campus life, compressing students' “nearby” experiences into a de-emotionalised and de-localised institutional framework.

More specifically, China's education policy transfer practices reveal the cultural tensions inherent in institutional replication. Cai (2020) argues that in the process of introducing foreign education systems, although the Chinese government emphasises modernisation, internationalisation, and market mechanisms, such policy transfers often neglect the conflicts with local cultural values. Against this backdrop, the rationalised operations of university spaces and institutions have not necessarily improved the learning experience. Instead, they may weaken students' emotional connection with the campus environment, marginalising or even eroding the experience of “nearby”.

Therefore, in contemporary Chinese universities, the governance logic of higher education shaped by global templates not only constructs the outer shell of institutions but also profoundly restructures students' perceptions of space, relationships, and daily life. This structural transformation is the key context for understanding the absence of “nearby”.

5.2.2 Relational Order in Chinese Collectivist Culture

In understanding contemporary Chinese university students' perception and practice of “nearby”, one cannot ignore the deep-rooted collectivist cultural tradition and its continued "relational order". This cultural logic is manifested in family structures, social habits, and societal expectations, beyond this, it is also deeply embedded in university spaces and institutions, shaping how young people perceive emotional bonds, familiar interactions, and spatial belonging.

In universities, this differentiated relational thinking is reflected in the preference and reliance on familiarised spaces. Students tend to establish stable relational networks within dormitories, classes, and small groups, forming core areas of emotional support and daily interaction. Compared to spaces that are sparsely populated, socially distant, or uncertain, those that allow for the repeatability of relationships are more likely to be considered as genuine “nearby”. Even within highly institutionalised university environments, this relationship density-oriented spatial order persists and is expressed through specific spatial arrangements and organisational forms, such as dormitory culture, study groups, student associations, and college banquets.

At the same time, the human sentiment emphasis implied by the relational order influences how students interpret institutional interventions and normative arrangements in space. When facing increasingly standardised, digitalised, and anonymised governance in higher education systems, students may exhibit a structural sense of loneliness, as these institutional arrangements erode the autonomy and warmth of interpersonal interaction, making “nearby” feel colder. Therefore, “nearby” is a socially embedded space within the relational structure. Under the dual influence of collectivism and relational order, students' sense of spatial belonging and emotional projection is not naturally attached to institutions but rather depends on whether relationships are sustained, emotions are intense, and interactions are rhythmic and repetitive. This cultural logic provides a crucial structural explanation for the observed fragmentation of “nearby” in institutionalised educational spaces.

5.2.3 How Higher Education Reform Can Achieve Modernity and Cultural Coexistence

The modernisation of higher education institutions is often accompanied by the expansion of standardised governance logic, including unified curricula, evaluation mechanisms, spatial planning, and performance indicators. This reform path, driven by efficiency rationality, is widely disseminated globally and has been actively adopted by Chinese universities. However, institutional transplantation does not automatically equate to success. For Chinese universities, long rooted in relational ethics, collectivism, and local culture, such reform paths may unintentionally undermine the warmth of space and the emotional foundation of daily life, leading to the fragmentation and alienation of “nearby”.

To address this issue, policymakers and educational space planners can attempt to introduce the concept and methodology of Cultural Impact Assessment (CIA). Partal and Dunphy (2016), through a systematic literature review, summarized that CIA is a tool used to identify and evaluate the potential impacts of policies or projects on local cultural structures, value systems, and lifestyles. It requires a systematic analysis of how a policy will affect the cultural practices, identity recognition, and social relationships of specific groups before policy design and implementation, thereby minimising cultural conflict and enhancing policy localisation.

Applying the CIA concept to higher education reform means that policymakers must thoroughly assess how proposed reforms will alter students' and teachers' daily rhythms, spatial perceptions, and interpersonal networks before implementing spatial changes, institutional adjustments, or governance upgrades. For example, when universities pursue campus-wide standardised management by closing off public green spaces or restricting non-functional activities such as planting flowers or wall posters, they should evaluate whether these actions harm the emotional foundation of cohabitation among teachers and students. Similarly, before implementing performance-driven faculty mentorship reforms, they should assess whether such systems replace existing familiar interactions and daily emotional support.

Furthermore, inspired by CIA, a series of institutional reconstruction pathways towards cultural coexistence can be proposed. For instance, Shanghai's recent "15-Minute Living Circle" policy suggests that residents should be able to complete essential activities such as living, learning, socialising, and exercising within a 15-minute walk from their homes. This model emphasises spatial accessibility and multifunctionality, capable of enhancing people's sense of belonging to their everyday environment. For universities, allowing a certain degree of non-functional space on campus, such as student gardens, graffiti walls, and animal cohabitation areas, not simply serves as environmental aesthetic restoration but more significantly reactivates cultural and emotional foundations.

Secondly, it is necessary to incorporate plural value systems into university governance to enhance its emotional dimension. The Andean Indigenous philosophy of *Buen Vivir* offers an important perspective for comparative education in this regard (Brown & McCowan, 2018). In contrast to modern Western governance models, which emphasise institutional normativity, quantifiable objectives, and economic performance, *Buen Vivir* advocates harmonious coexistence, reciprocity, and relationality between humans and nature, as well as among people themselves, recognising nature and communities as subjects with agency and rights. Rather than prioritising singular economic growth as ultimate ends, it focuses on the quality of present life and emotional connectedness (Brown & McCowan, 2018). In the context of university governance, this entails designing institutions that not only uphold norms and efficiency but also prioritise the reconstruction of familiarity, trust, and a sense of community in everyday interactions.

For Chinese higher education, the principles of *Buen Vivir* offer significant inspiration for moving beyond the prevailing human capital orientation and instrumentalist tendencies. As Marginson (2023) observes, students' self-formation is profoundly shaped by opportunities for social interaction, which are themselves conditioned by the structures and cultures of higher education. While current models of talent cultivation in Chinese universities tend to prioritise academic performance, employability, and quantifiable evaluation, which can, to

some extent, undermine students' emotional development and the building of social relationships. *Buen Vivir* advocates epistemic plurality, the openness of boundaries between disciplines and roles, and learning within networks of relationships between the human and the non-human world (Brown & McCowan, 2018). These principles suggest that Chinese universities should design curricula and institutional arrangements that create more opportunities for interdisciplinary and cross-spatial interaction, fostering sustained engagement between students, faculty, communities, and the natural environment, while reducing the commodification and hierarchisation of education, rather than viewing it merely as a pathway to credentials and market competition.

5.2.4 Cultural Coexistence in Institutional Modernisation

Institutional transplantation is not value neutral. Any educational reform inherently involves the reconfiguration of cultural cognition and spatial politics. The rational governance and performance orientation introduced under the banner of modernisation are often accompanied by the rejection and erasure of local experiences and emotional structures. When observing the gradual ineffectiveness of "nearby" on university campuses, the cause is not necessarily young people's voluntary abandonment of community-oriented lifestyles, but the invisible reconstruction of spatial, relational, and existential possibilities by institutional design.

The absence of "nearby" reflects the tension between modern higher education systems and local culture. This tension reveals the systemic exclusion of non-standardised elements such as emotion, embodiment, and ecological relations by institutions. Under governance logic based on abstract individuals, the once rich symbiotic relationships among people and between humans and nature are deemed irrelevant background variables. Space becomes functionalised, emotional connections are weakened, and non-human life is eliminated or driven away, leading to the structural roots of students' disconnection from "nearby".

To achieve truly human-centred educational modernisation, it is necessary to go beyond rational instrumental logic and shift towards an institutional construction

approach that is more attentive to cultural differences, local customs, and ecological ethics. As Bereday (1964) reminded, the value of foreign educational practices lies in informing reflective understanding and contextual improvement. This means starting from the micro-dimensions of spatial organisation, emotional expression, and daily rhythm to rebuild the cultural coexistence capacity of institutions. It requires us to evaluate whether institutions operate efficiently together with questioning whether they allow people to reconnect with the lives, environments, and communities around them. Only in this sense can modernisation cease to signify alienation and division and instead become an open process that truly responds to local experiences and relational ethics.

Through a reconsideration of "nearby" theory, this chapter seeks to reveal the conceptual limitations and challenges of applicability that the term faces within the urban context of contemporary China, focusing on two key dimensions: ecofeminism and the modern higher education system.

First, the introduction of ecological feminism challenges the assumption of "nearby" as solely a network of interpersonal relations. It highlights the irreplaceable role of the natural environment and non-human elements in emotional attachment and spatial perception, suggesting that the construction of "nearby" is rooted in both social structures and ecological relations. Second, the adoption of Western university models within China's higher education system reinforces rationalist logics, leading to a systematic compression of the spontaneity on which "nearby" depends. This provides an institutional explanation for the gradual decline of "nearby" in everyday life.

These analyses indicate that "nearby" is not a self-evident or universally applicable spatial category. Rather, it is a process of social practice that is continually redefined through specific cultural contexts and embodied subjectivities. For this reason, understanding "nearby" requires a return to the dynamic interaction between local social structures and individual lived experience, accompanied by ongoing reflection on its boundaries, foundations and latent tensions.

6. Conclusion

This study adopts “nearby” as a theoretical framework to explore how university students in contemporary China perceive, experience, and construct spatial and social relationships under the broader contexts of urbanisation, digitalisation, and the modernisation of the educational system. This research focuses on university students in Shanghai, presenting an analysis of the compression, reconstruction, and reproduction of “nearby” as an everyday social space. Rather than verifying whether “nearby” has disappeared, the study aims to understand, through detailed descriptions of students lived experiences, how individuals in highly institutionalised urban environments confront spatial alienation and relational thinning, and how they attempt to reestablish socially meaningful and personally situated modes of connection.

The findings reveal that the compression of “nearby” is primarily manifested in the disciplining and segmentation of students’ everyday spatial experience through time constraints, institutional routines, and digital media use. Under the pressure of the education system, students’ daily schedules are highly regimented, and space is functionally used with little room for emotional or spontaneous practices. The deep embedding of digital media further reduces reliance on physical space. As a result, students increasingly construct their social perception through algorithmically driven online interactions, while “nearby”, as a bodily situated and interaction-based social space, becomes progressively marginalised.

The study proposes the “island-chain model” to illustrate how “nearby”, although facing structural compression, has not entirely vanished but has instead been reconstructed in new forms within the cracks and gaps of institutional life. Students actively seek or create low-intensity, low-purpose social encounters that often take the form of chance meetings, shared presence, or informal collaboration. These everyday practices give rise to recognizable others and fluid networks composed of both light and strong ties.

The research also highlights that the reconstruction of “nearby” differs along gender and cultural lines. From the perspective of ecofeminism, female

participants are more likely to incorporate non-human entities such as animals and plants into their spatial experience, imbuing them with emotional meaning. This mode of perception challenges dominant spatial logics centred on productivity and instrumental rationality. At the same time, tensions between individual cultural perception and institutional logic are intensified by the global templates of higher education, which shape how students engage with their urban surroundings. While students strive for order and efficiency, they also yearn for belonging and authentic interaction. This tension becomes a key factor in whether and how "nearby" can be reimagined in practice.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in re-examining "nearby" as a seemingly minor but deeply sociologically significant concept. Rather than reducing social relationships to abstract networks or psychological states, "nearby" offers an analytical perspective that interweaves spatiality and sociality. It enables a return to the lived practices of individuals, beyond macro-level institutional analysis, to understand how they construct meaningful life worlds under the dual forces of urban governance and digital technology. By integrating theories such as ecofeminism, chaxugeju, and the risk society, this study also proposes a multi-layered analytical framework that offers new theoretical leverage for understanding the social practices of contemporary youth.

Methodologically, the study adopts an exploratory combination of map-drawing from arts-based research, in-depth semi-structured interviews. This approach offers an innovative method for capturing the complex relationships between spatial perception and social experience. As a non-verbal form of expression, mapping enables participants to externalise and reflect on their spatial experiences, while also providing researchers with a window into the emotional logics and meaning-making pathways embedded in space.

There are inevitably limitations to this study. Since the research focuses on Shanghai as a highly urbanized case, the mechanisms of compression and reconstruction of "nearby" identified here may not be directly applicable to youth in smaller cities or rural areas. In addition, the use of convenience sampling means that the participant group lacks systematic diversity in terms of gender and

socioeconomic background. Future research could expand the geographical and demographic scope of the sample, including youth from different city tiers and social classes, to better examine the heterogeneity of “nearby” experiences across structural contexts. Moreover, as digital space continues to evolve, further studies might systematically investigate the overlap, substitution, or competition between virtual space and physical “nearby”.

In conclusion, within the context of a highly mobile and increasingly institutionalized society, “nearby” is both a spatial experience in decline and an everyday strategy of imaginative reconstruction. How university students navigate this tension to position themselves and form social connections speaks not only to their individual processes of socialisation, but also to the ways in which contemporary institutions and cultures exert influence at the micro-level of daily life. It is hoped that this study’s preliminary exploration will offer both theoretical insight and methodological grounding for future research on this evolving theme, as well as be beneficial to the localisation of the global template to China or any other underrepresented soil.

Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to my supervisors, Professor Liam Gearon and Dr Gonzalo Hidalgo Bazan. I feel very fortunate to have had such rigorous and supportive supervisors during my master's degree. I am grateful to Professor Gearon, a renowned scholar who offered patient advice on how best to present this dissertation and giving me tremendous encouragement along the way. I would also like to thank Gonzalo. He reviewed the ideas with outstanding critical thinking and rigour. Each piece of his feedback impressed me with his deep scholarship and perceptive insight. Those two supervisors allowed me to observe closely the methods and scholarly conduct of leading academics. Receiving their support and guidance during my master's studies has been one of the greatest blessings of my life.

Secondly, I am sincerely grateful to all the tutors and fellow students in the CIE cohort. They are truly talented, inclusive, and caring people. I could feel the commitment of our tutors in building this cohort full of warmth and mutual support, and I genuinely enjoyed every moment of studying and living with such admirable tutors and classmates. I am especially grateful to Dr Aliya Khalid. She is always ready to lend a hand whether we struggled with our studies or daily life. I really admire her generosity and goodness, and her example inspires me to become someone like her in the future, doing my best to support anyone in need.

最后，我想感谢我自己。"我与我周旋久，宁做我"[1]。

Lastly, I wish to thank myself. "Long have I contended with myself, I choose to be myself still".

感谢所有在我人生氤氲未明之际为我提灯的人。"高山仰止，景行行止"[2]；行文至此，恭敬在心。

Gratitude to all who lit a lantern for me when my life lay in mist. "Their virtue, as lofty mountains to look up to and as broad paths to walk upon, fills me with reverence". As I write these final lines, my respect rests quietly in my heart.

[1] Originates from Shishuo Xinyu (《世说新语》, A New Account of the Tales of the World), a collection of anecdotes and remarks compiled in the fifth century.
[2] Originates from the Book of Songs (《诗经·小雅·车辖》), the earliest extant anthology of Chinese poetry, compiled between the 11th and 6th centuries BCE.

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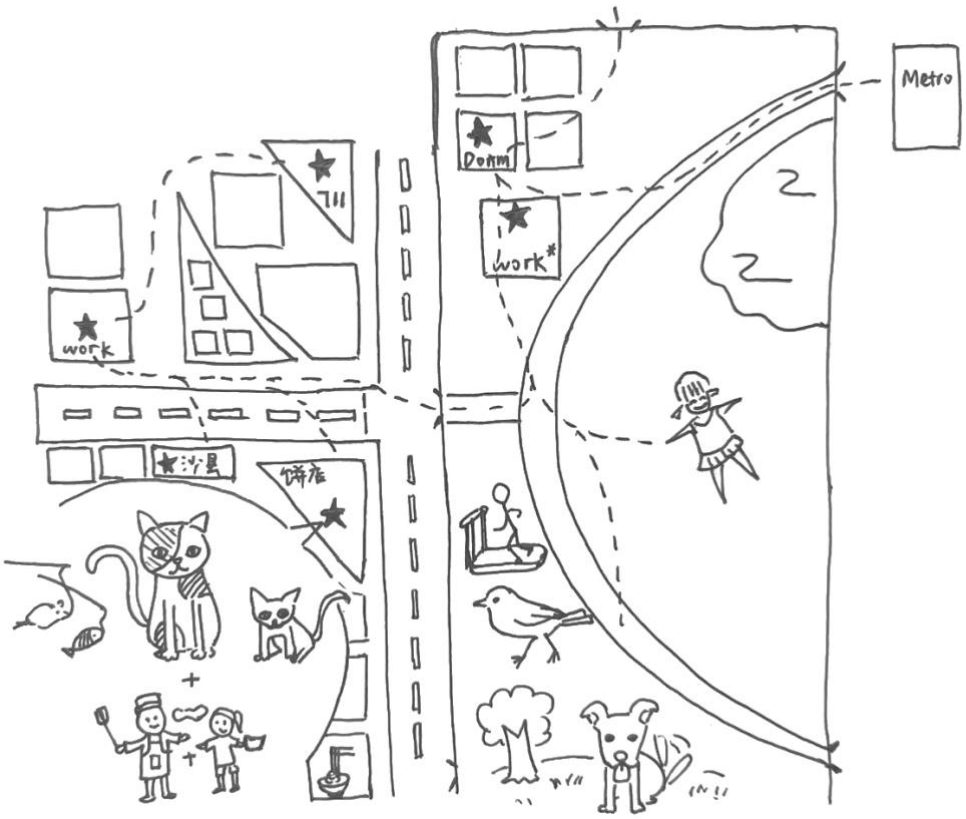
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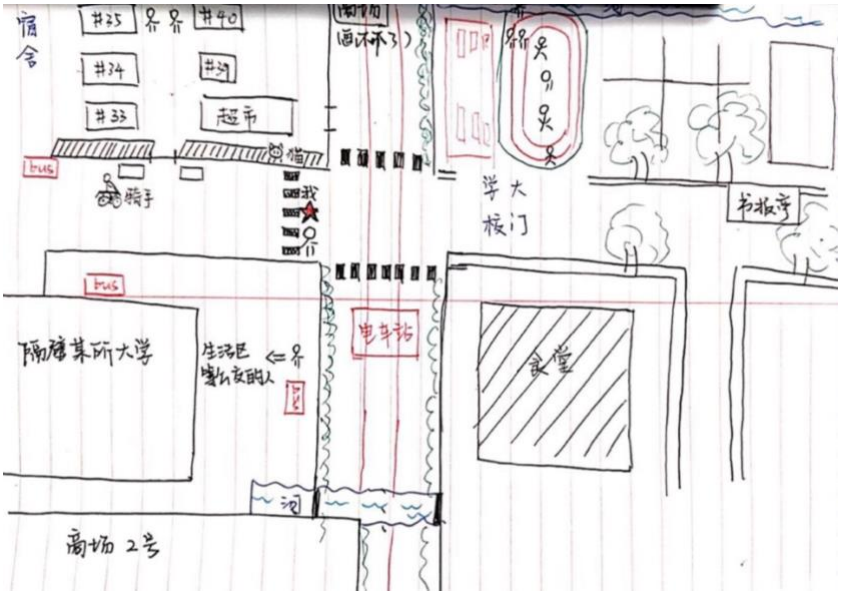
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Art-based works

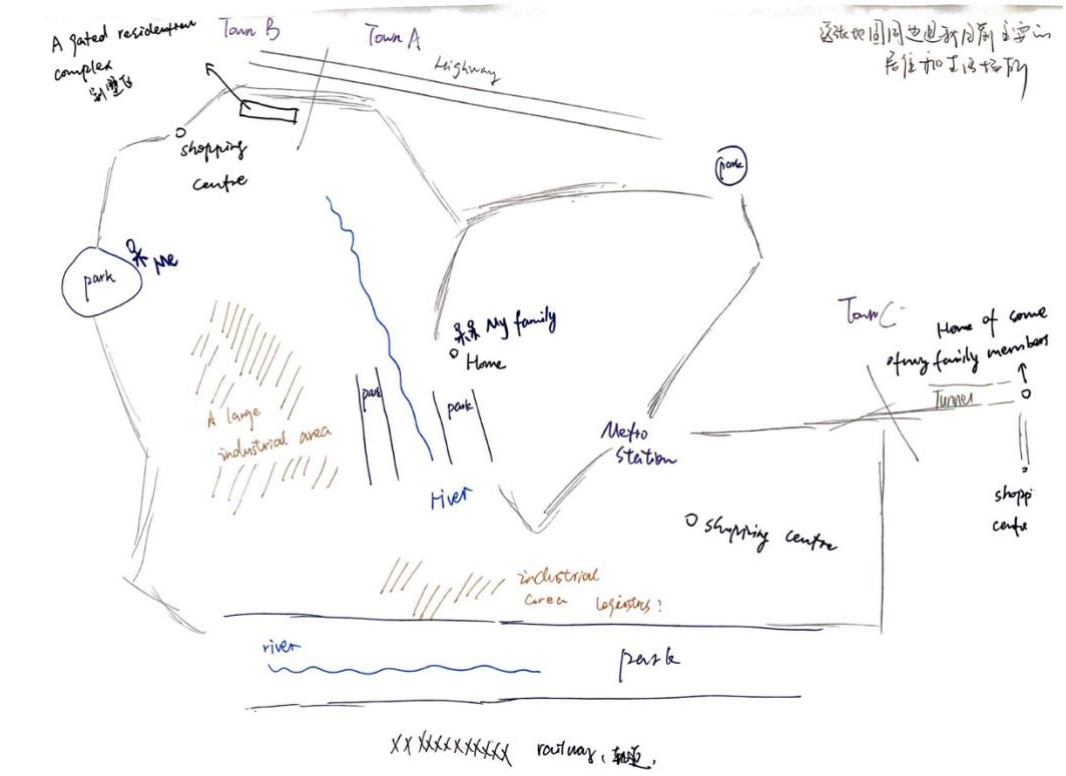
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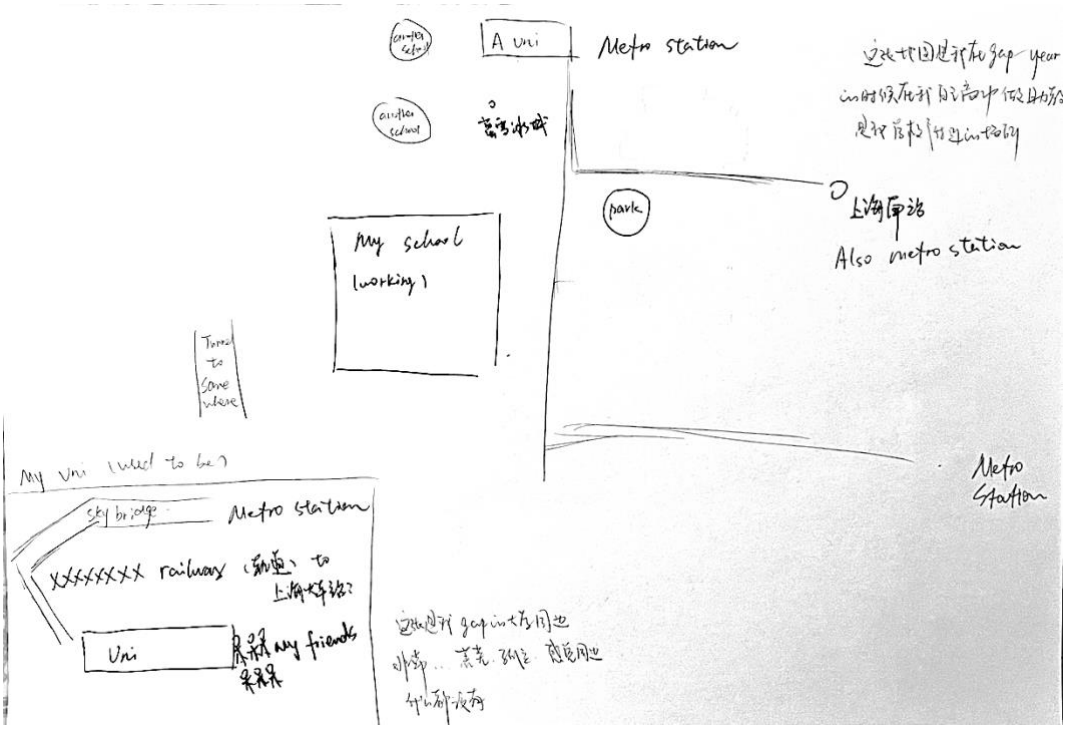


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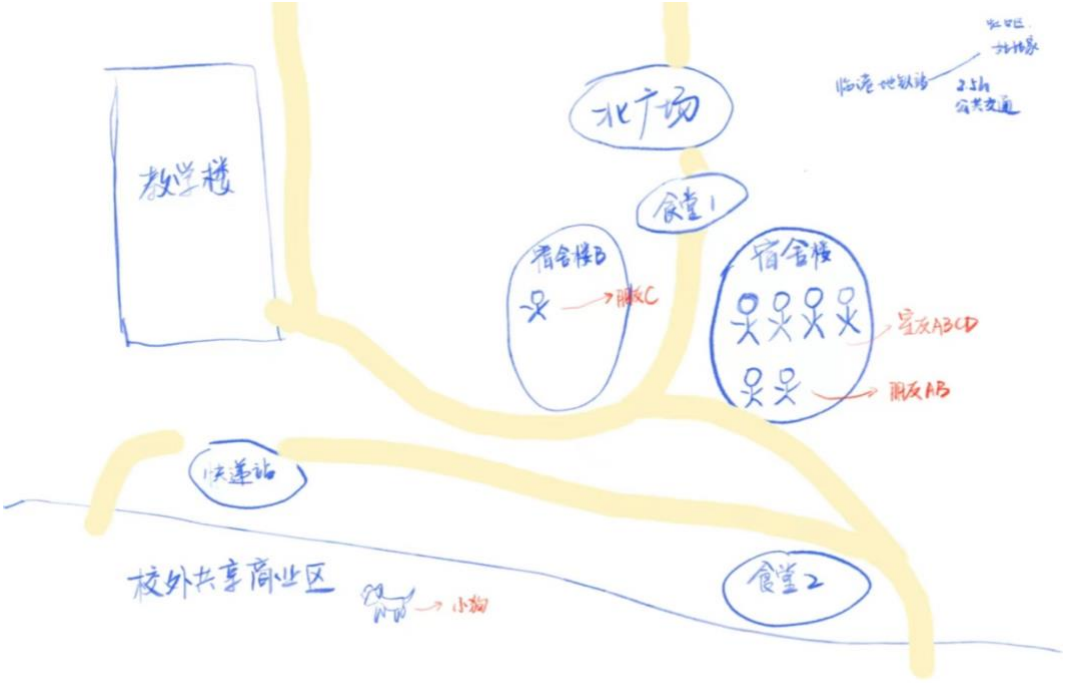


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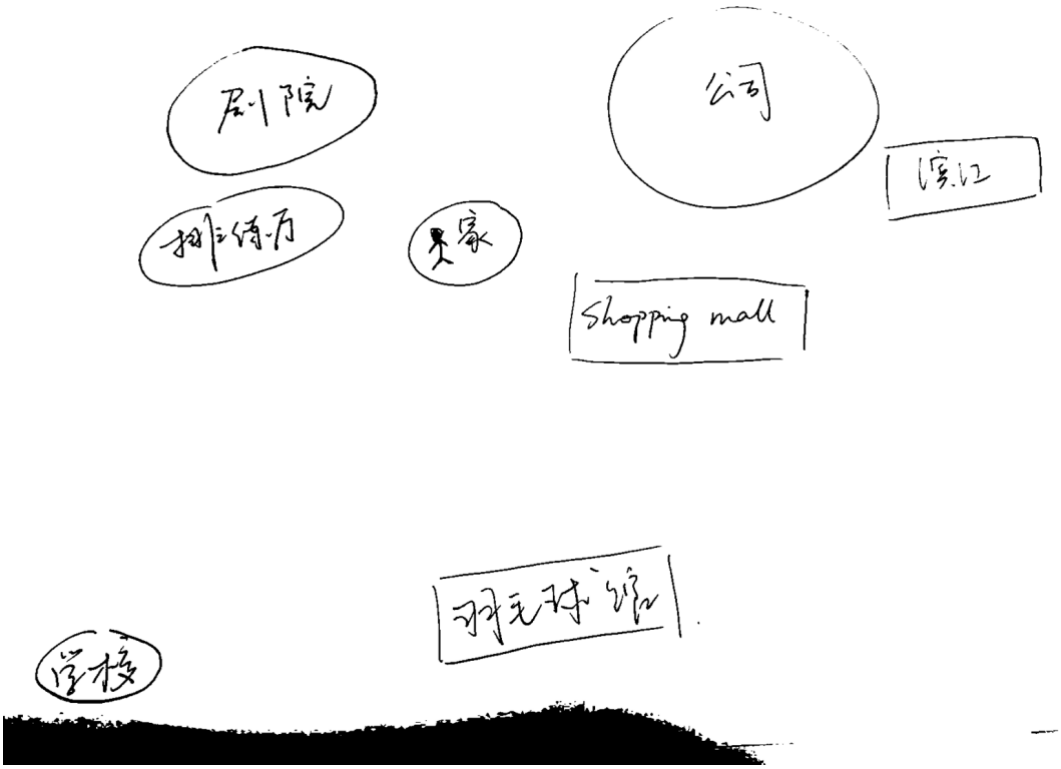

A gated residential complex
Town B
Town A
highway
shopping centre
park
park
Me
My family
Home
A large industrial area
park
park
River
Metro Station
Town C
Home of some of my family members
Tunnel
shopping centre
industrial area
logistics
river
park
XX XXXXXXXXXX railway (高速)


A Uni
Metro station
park
上海师范
Also metro station
My school (working)
Metro Station
My Uni (what I want to be)
sky bridge
Metro station
XXXXXXXX railway (高速) to 上海火车站
Uni
my friends

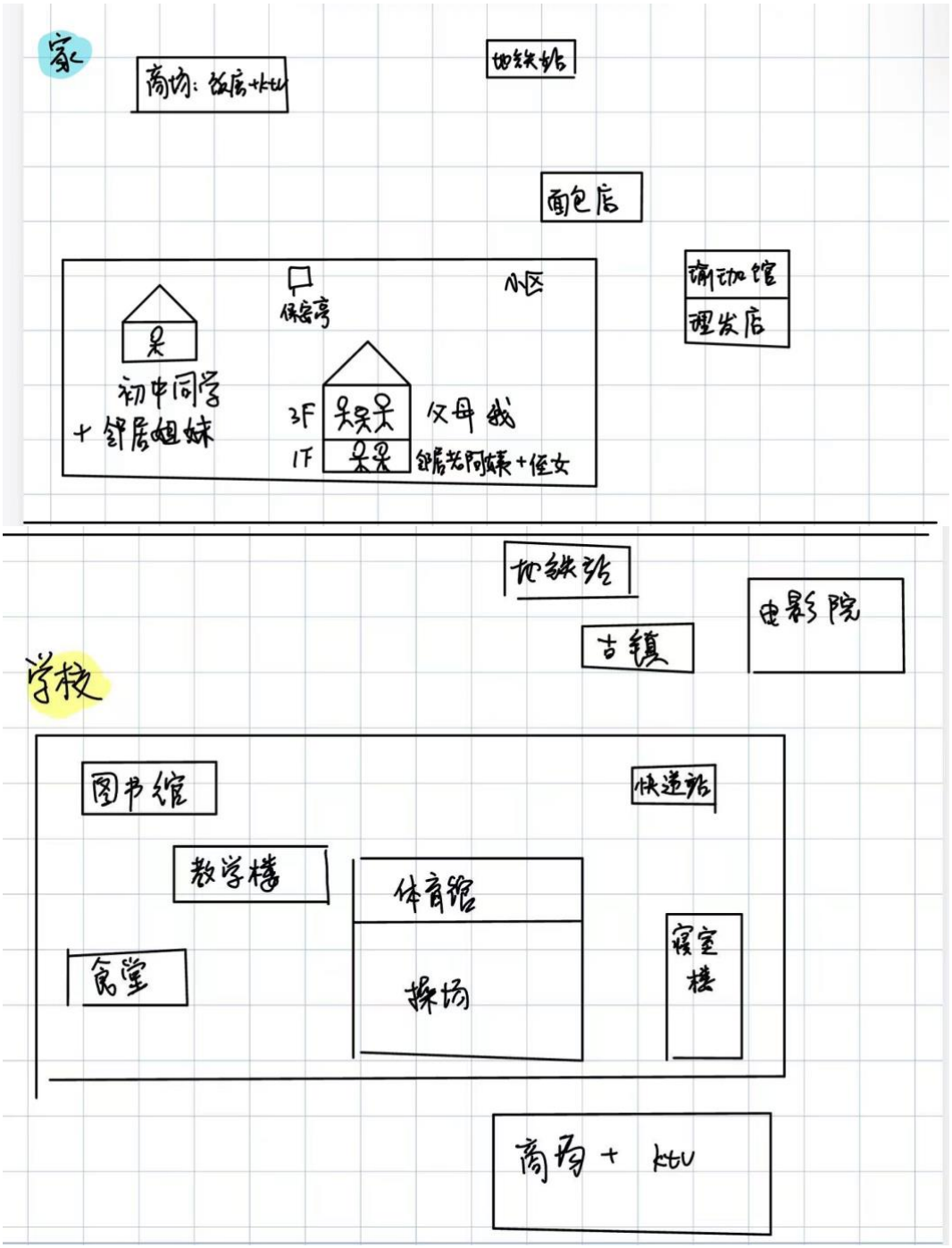
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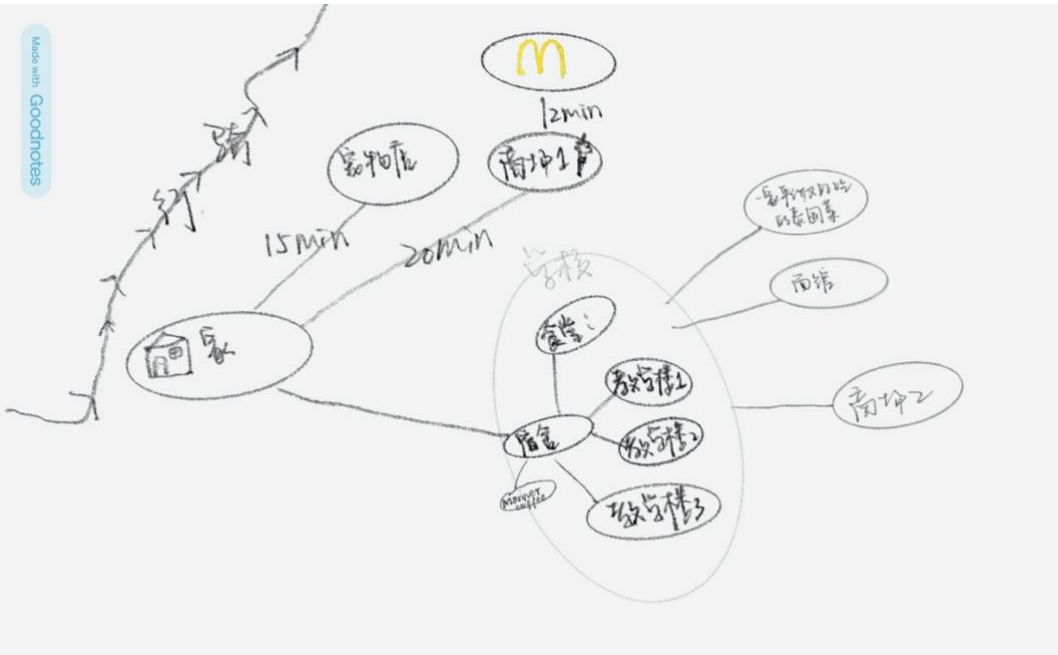
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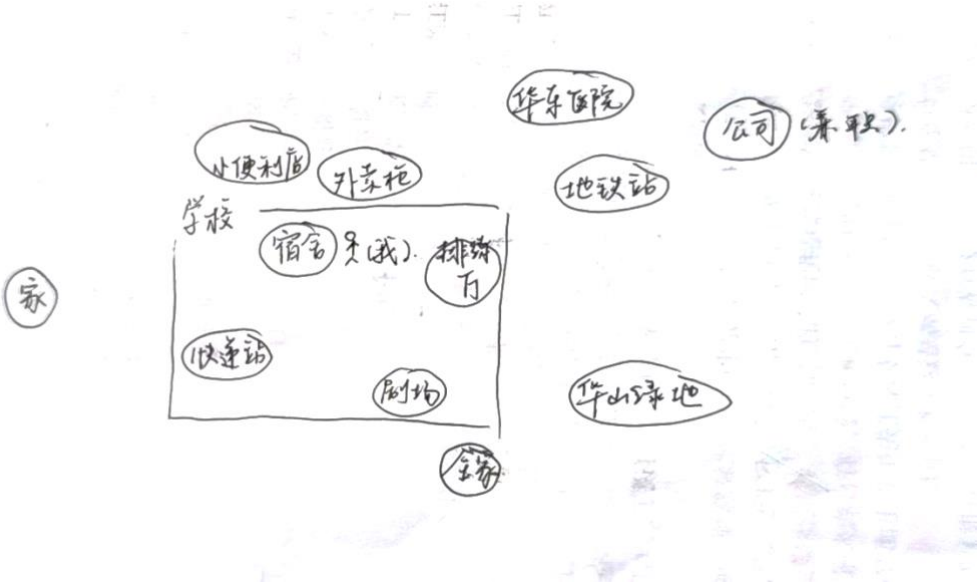
06


家
商场：饭店+ktv
地铁站
面包店
瑜伽馆
理发店
小区
保安亭
初中同学
+邻居姐妹
3F
1F
父母 我
邻居老阿姨+侄女
地铁站
电影院
古镇
学校
图书馆
快递站
教学楼
体育馆
操场
食堂
寝室楼
商场 + ktv

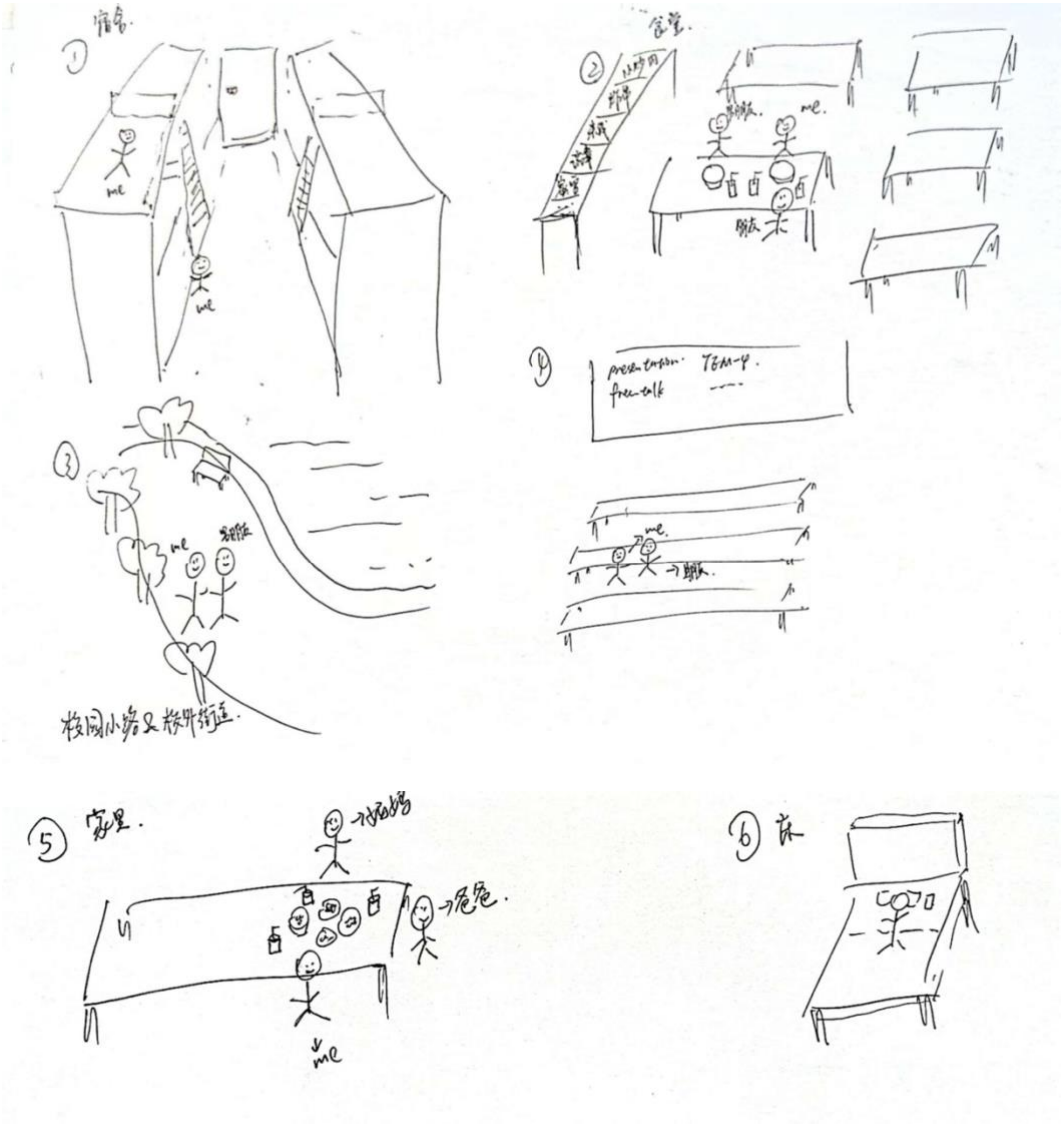
07


Made with Goodnotes
12min
15min
20min
家
学校
食堂
宿舍
南门
南门2

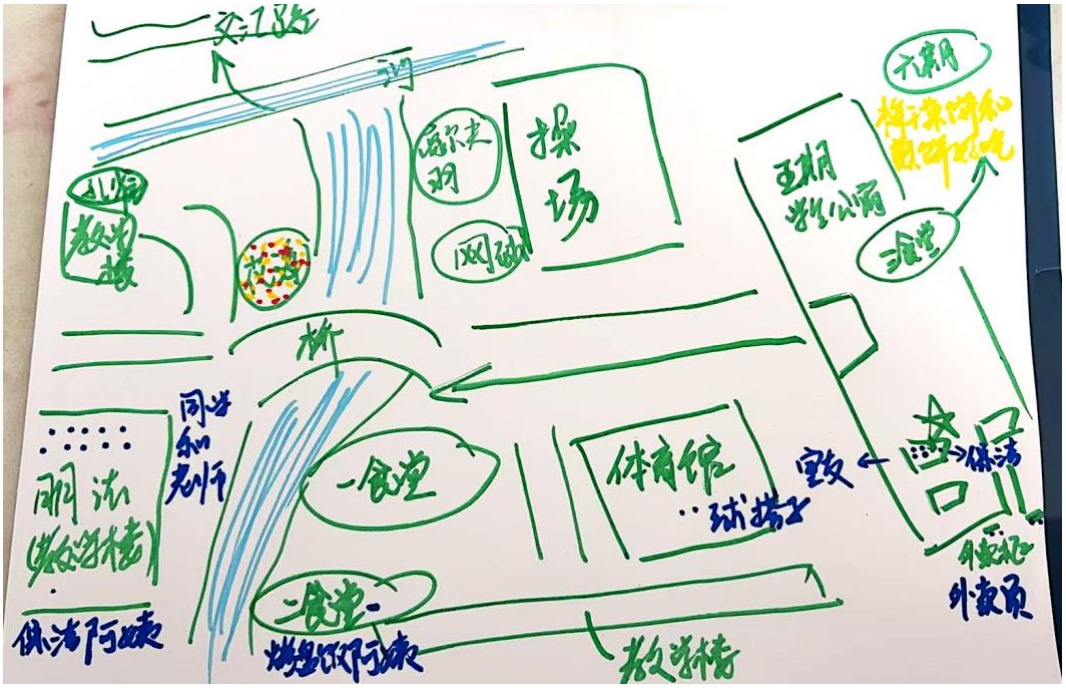
08


华东医院
公司(兼职)
地铁站
外卖柜
小便利店
学校
宿舍(我)
排球厅
家
快递站
剧场
华山绿地
全家

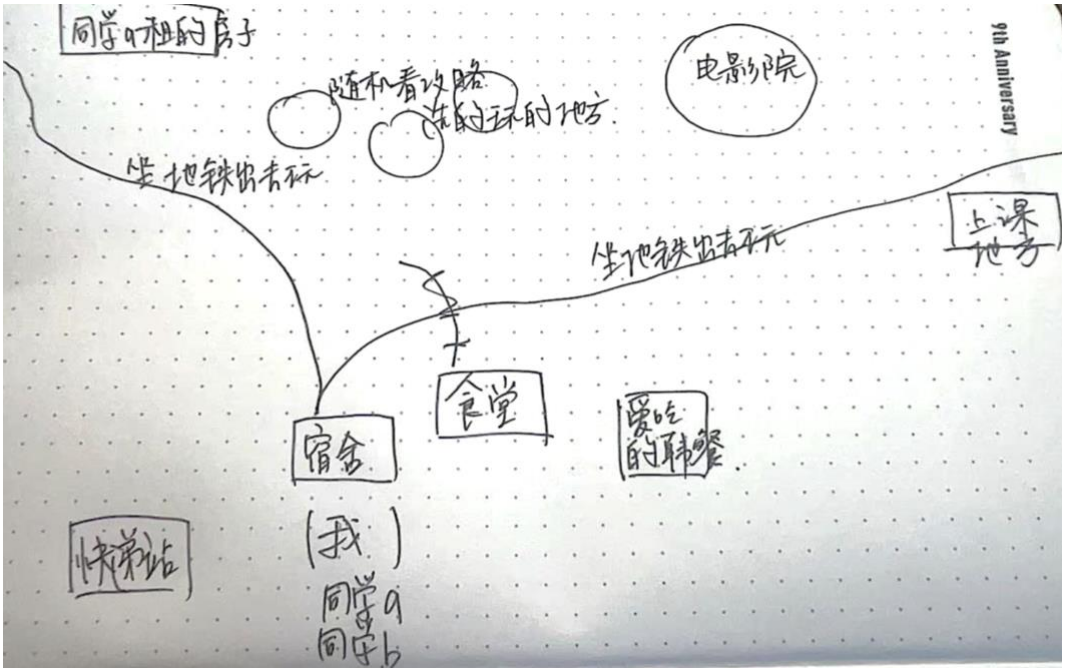
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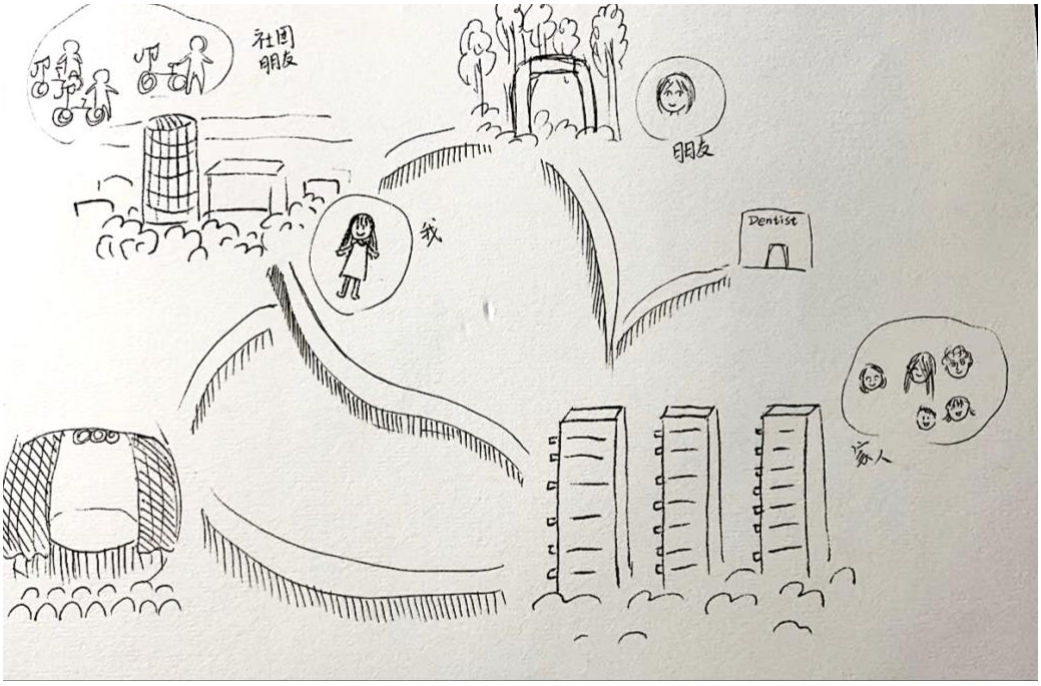
10


操场
体育馆
一食堂
二食堂
教学楼
桥
同学和老师
宿舍
外卖员

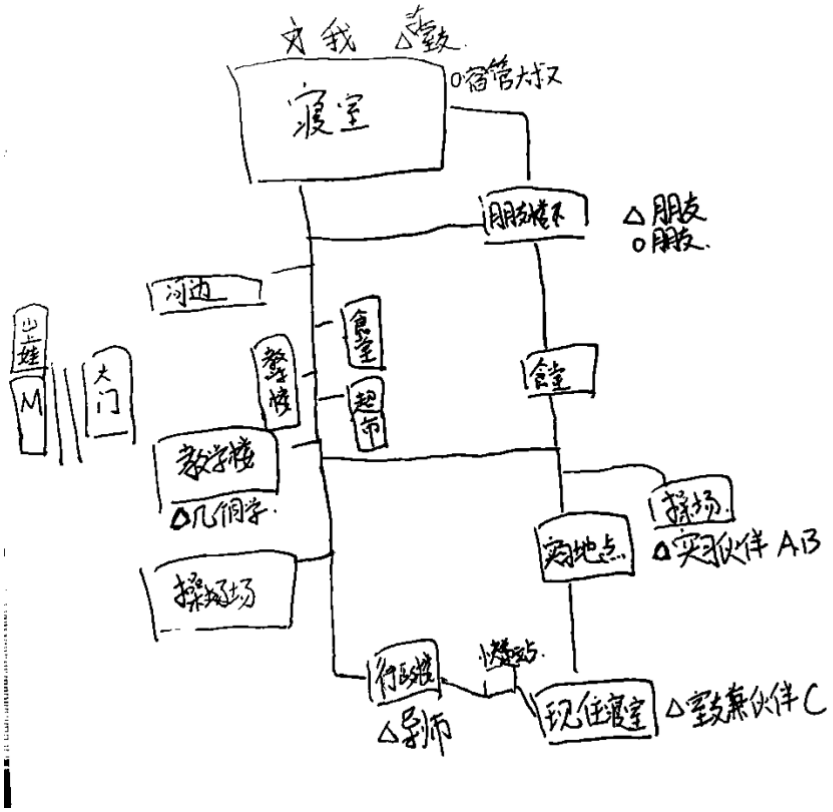
11


同学的租的房子
电影院
坐地铁出去玩
上课地方
宿舍
食堂
快递站
(我)同学的同学

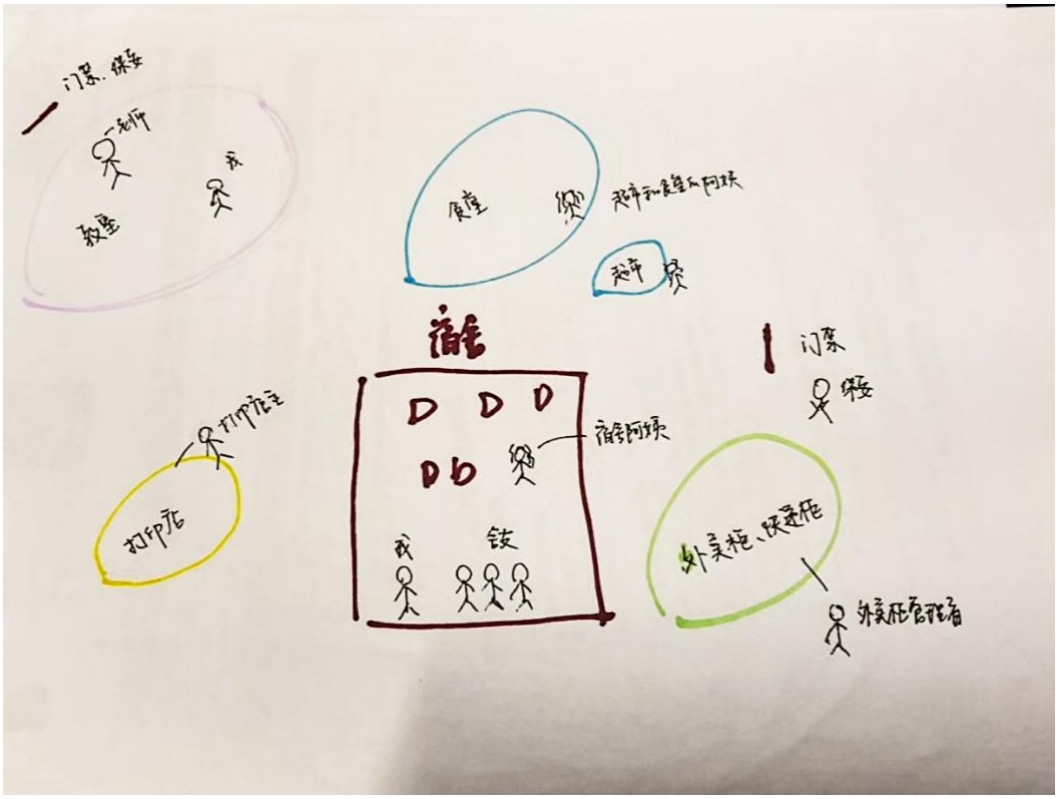
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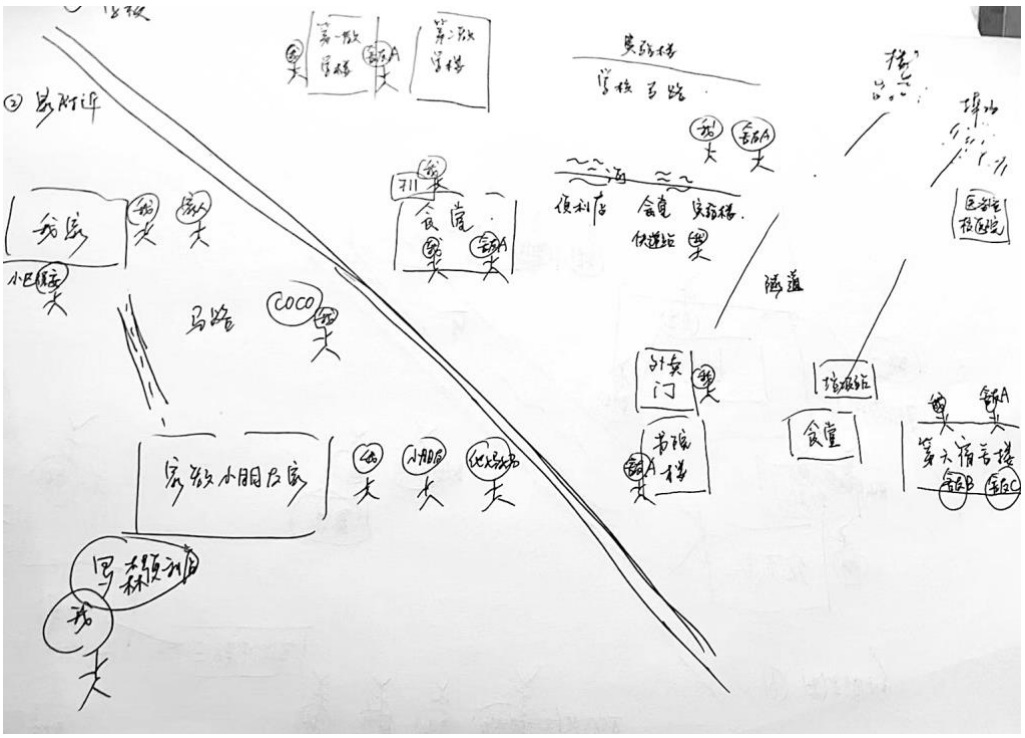
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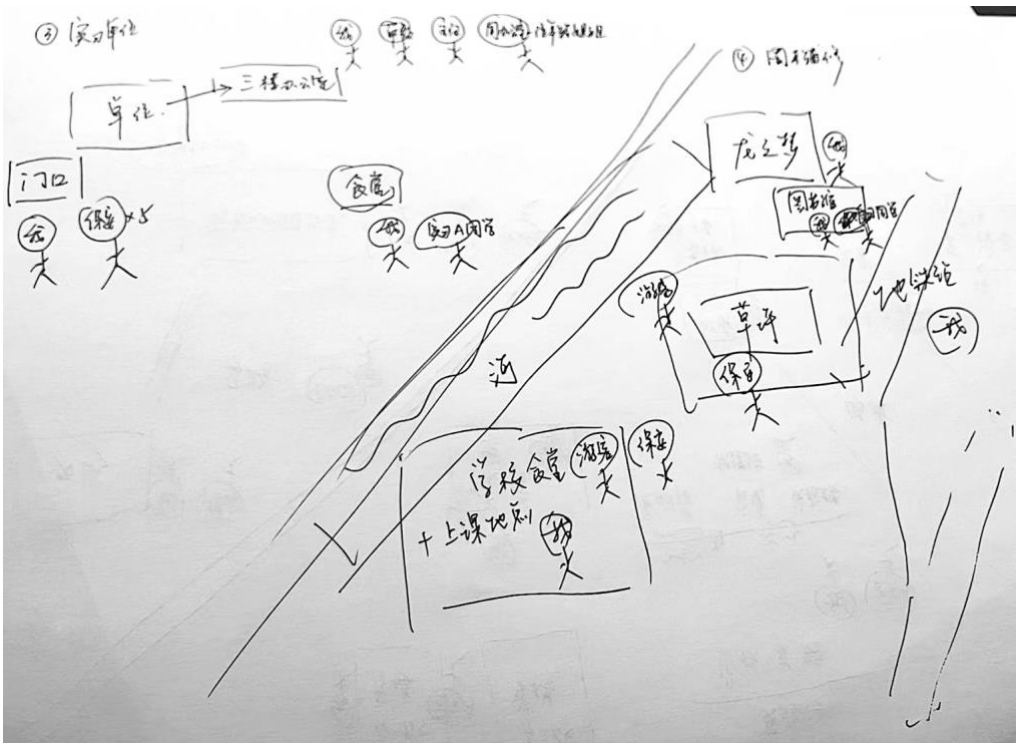


14


门禁、保安
一刘师
我
救星
食堂
我
超市和食堂人阿姨
超市
厨
门禁
接
D D D
DD
厨房阿姨
打印店
打印店主
我
饺
外卖柜、快递柜
外卖柜管理者

15


第一教学楼
第二教学楼
实验楼
学校马路
食堂
便利店
快递站
操场
医务室
校门
书报楼
第六宿舍楼
教小朋友
COCO
马路
罗森便利店
小巴站


实习单位
三楼办公室
门口
食堂
实习人同宿
龙之梦
图书馆
草坪
保安
河
学校食堂
上课地点
我