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Negotiating Self and Others: A Narrative Study of Chinese Boarding School Experiences

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Abstract

Boarding schools in the British context are often associated with privilege and long-term psychological effects on ex-boarders. Rather than focusing on the impact of boarding school, this study explores how Chinese boarders make sense of their experiences within the specific social, cultural, and political context of China. Drawing on narrative interviews with seven participants who attended Chinese boarding schools, the study offers insight into how boarding school life is structured and experienced in China.

Applying a relational lens, the research presents individual narrative portraits that illustrate boarders' relationships with family, peers, teachers and school staff. Through these relational narratives, the study explores how students navigated their everyday lives in boarding schools and how they related to others in the setting of Chinese boarding schools. The analysis reveals the active role boarders played in engaging in personal growth, shaping their relationships, and negotiating institutional structures.

This research highlights the diversity of Chinese boarding school experiences and the various ways in which students engage with those around them. It suggests that boarders are not merely passive recipients of institutional and relational influences, but are actively involved in constructing their relations. The study contributes to the understanding of boarding school life in China with a grounded, participant-informed perspective on relational dynamics.

Lay Summary

Boarding schools are often seen as places of privilege and strict discipline, especially in the British context, where past students sometimes report long-term psychological effects. Instead of focusing on these well-known views, this study looks at a different context: how students in China experience life at boarding school.

Through in-depth conversations with seven people who studied at Chinese boarding schools, this research explores what everyday life is really like for boarders in China. It asks how students understood and navigated their time away from home, within China's unique cultural, social, and political environment.

By looking closely at their stories, the study shows how these students related to their families, teachers, peers, and other school staff. It reveals how they managed friendships, handled rules and routines, and shaped their own paths while living at school. Far from being simply controlled by the school system, these students played an active part in shaping their own growth and relationships.

Overall, the research highlights the many different ways students experience boarding school in China. It shows that boarding students aren't just passive followers of rules; they actively build connections and make sense of their lives in meaningful ways. This study offers a new perspective on boarding school life in China, grounded in the real voices and stories of those who lived it.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

The topic of boarding school came to me when I encountered a client who had attended boarding school in the UK. Although they did not speak much about their experiences in boarding schools, I felt a sense of familiarity with their separation from their family environment; however, I also felt foreign to the details of their school life. My clinical supervisor then mentioned the book *Boarding school syndrome: The psychological trauma of the 'privileged' child* by Schaverien (2015). With my questions in the counselling practice, I started to read the clinical presentations and interpretations of clients who had miserable childhoods in British boarding schools. Following the focus on psychological trauma in people's experiences of boarding school, I found more relevant books in the same stance presented by Duffell (2000, 2016); Duffell and Basset (2016); Laughton, Paech-Ujejski, and Patterson (2021). As I delved into the world of British "boarders" — a term referring to boarding school students — I felt horrified about their experiences at boarding schools. Growing up in Chinese boarding schools myself, I also felt a strong sense of dissonance and distance from the vocabulary used, such as "syndrome, trauma, survivor, captive..."(Schaverien 2015; Duffell and Basset 2016).

According to my mom, I did not cry when I was first sent to the boarding nursery at two years old and adapted well to the subsequent boarding schools, while some children cried hard and could not let go of their parents. Shaped by my fourteen and a half years in Chinese boarding schools, school always meant boarding for me. The boarding school settings, like the orderly schedule, strict rules, and intense study environment, run in my blood. Under the same boarding environment, I witnessed peers' suffering, acceptance, resistance, thriving, enjoyment, and hatred while boarding from nursery to high school.

I still remember my eagerness to share my progress in games with my friends after my arrival at school, and my annoyance with the strict boarding system when I had to call my father to buy and send a quilted vest as required, because I had forgotten to buy one over the weekend. As for my peers, they could perceive the boarding school as the best school they had ever attended when they enjoyed social life and achieved success, yet they might feel failed by the boarding system when they

underperformed in exams or got caught using mobile phones. The perception and interaction with the boarding environment were dynamic and complex.

From the very beginning of my journey to get a bachelor's degree in psychology to my choice of counselling and psychotherapy as my postgraduate direction, I engaged closely and frequently with different parts of myself. I reflected on my childhood and development in relation to various theories and concepts about the human psyche, especially in my personal therapy and counselling training. As I reviewed and reconsidered my past experiences, my understanding of the boarding schools I attended also shifted from a clear and simple description of good or bad to more complex, nuanced, and contextual perspectives. Comparing to the singular traumatic script in boarding schools from the Western academic materials (Schaverien 2015; Duffell and Basset 2016), those perspectives made me wonder whether there is more than one way or aspect to make sense of the boarding school experience, and whether the British narrative of trauma and survival might also be enacted or take a different shape in the Chinese context.

Immersed in Chinese culture, my experience of boarding school also features the relational encounters rather than the boarding schools only as learning institutions, as the Chinese culture valued the relationships with others (Q. Wang and Conway 2004; Shi 2013). Years after I left boarding school, I could still recall many moments. On Sunday evenings, as the closing melody of the radio programme faded, I left the car with a goodbye to my mom before stepping onto the school bus, which was difficult for both of us, but also mutually acknowledged as a necessary journey for me. During the weekdays, I often felt homesick and distant from the comfort of home. But on Fridays, when I stepped off the school bus and into my mom's open arms, everything felt familiar again. I would tell her all about what had happened at school, and we would go on a big shopping trip to the local supermarket to buy all the snacks I had been craving all week. In the evening, I would settle in with my favourite TV programmes and a new Disney magazine—complete with a small toy—small rituals that helped me reconnect with home.

At school, I was a sensitive child who checked my roommates' name tags on the beds and found a name I could recognise to wake him and chat with me on the first night's sleep. My sensitivity drove and helped me to build close relationships with

my classmates and roommates, who often offered me support while I was away from home. From favourite songs, animations, TV shows, and games to exam stress, family issues, secret love, ambition, and hope, we had the time and intimacy to talk about everything. On the other hand, I was prone to the impact of others, which could be warmth or hostilities, compliments or judgements, engagement or exclusion from the group and what was popular among peers. Mixed with all kinds of different emotions, peers meant so much to me that I kept organising gatherings and stayed in contact with many peers across primary school, middle school and high school.

I enjoyed learning new things in school. My desire to acquire knowledge and grasp the underlying mechanism of chemical reactions or the grammar of classical Chinese often sent me to teachers' desks during their office hours. My efforts paid off, and I consistently performed well in my studies, often earning satisfactory marks. Apart from schoolwork, I also talked about everyday life with teachers, through which I gained valuable insights and guidance on personal development, stress management, and my social life. To me, my belief in teachers stemmed from their close observation of and engagement with me and my peers, as well as their life experiences as adults. They also made mistakes in teaching, gave harsh criticism to me, other peers or the whole class when we did not meet the standard or their expectations, and had days when they were not available for students, but it never created distance between me and the teachers. After graduation, I would sometimes visit my teachers at schools or meet them in cafes for casual chats.

The relationships I encounter at boarding schools are invaluable and memorable to me. The rich and various interpersonal relationships constituted a significant part of my boarding school experience. As I reflected further in my personal therapy, those interpersonal encounters and moments had a profound impact on me, both during and after my time at boarding school, shaping my development and identity. Like all children, I experienced a range of emotions towards others at school during my childhood, which did not feel unbearable or traumatic to undermine my life. In the miserable accounts presented by Schaverien (2015); Duffell and Basset (2016), the family often means abandonment and separation; peers stand for bullying and oppression; staff represent strictness and ignorance. Consequently, those boarders suffered at boarding schools and encountered various issues in their lives after

graduation. It appears that the British context of class and privilege is significant in the cases presented in the books (Schaverien 2015; Duffell and Basset 2016). Therefore, I aim to focus on how boarders relate to others in Chinese boarding schools, considering the Chinese social, historical, and cultural context.

By investigating the Chinese boarding school experience, I also intend to offer perspectives for counselling practice. Rather than imposing a singular and specific view on the experience, I hope to encourage a more contextualised, relational understanding of boarders' lived experiences in China. Instead of stressing the importance of parental relationships, I aim to explore different relationships within the developmental trajectories of boarders by incorporating relational experiences with family, peers, and teachers in Chinese boarding settings. My aim is to promote greater awareness and reflexivity from diverse perspectives in counselling and psychotherapy practice, facilitating the process of acknowledging, understanding and responding sensitively to clients with Chinese boarding school backgrounds.

1.1 Thesis Outline

Following the introduction in Chapter 1, I provide a literature review on boarding schools, including Chinese contexts related to boarding schools and the relationships in Chinese boarding schools, in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, I explain the methodology of the thesis by elucidating my position on experience, ontology, epistemology, the lens of relationship and methodological considerations. Chapter 4 illustrates the practical implementation of the method in action. The narrative and analysis of each participant are presented in Chapter 5 in an idiographic manner, with relevant research closely engaged with the elements mentioned in the narratives. The discussion in Chapter 6 situates the findings of this research project within the academic field of boarding schools, where I consolidate the results and connect them with existing views in research on boarding schools. Chapter 7 concludes the thesis with a summary of the study, specifies the limitations and the contribution of the current research and offers suggestions for future research.

1.2 Notes on Language

- **Boarding and Boarder**

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2025b), boarding stands for “The supplying of stated meals; the obtaining of food, or food and lodging, at another person’s house for a stipulated charge.” And boarder stands for “A person who boards, or takes food, or food and lodging, at the house of another in return for payment; a person who lives in a boarding-house or with a family as one of its members, at a fixed rate.” (2025a) Those meanings include the accommodation aspect of boarding school. Following the use of “boarding” and “boarder” in the books about boarding school by Schaverien (2015); Duffell and Basset (2016); Cavenagh, McPherson, and Ogden (2024), the “boarding” and “boarder” in this thesis refer to boarding school and boarding school student specifically.

According to White (2004), the proportion of boarders in boarding schools can vary, and for a school to be classified as a boarding school, the percentage of residential students generally needs to fall within a specific range, typically between 50% and 75%. However, there is little discussion or consensus on what the exact percentage should be, and no clear definitions are available in the Chinese context. In the interviews conducted for this study, participants reported that over 90% of the students in their schools were boarders. Therefore, the boarding schools examined in this research, as described by the participants, had residential populations exceeding 90%, and it is from this context that the study approaches Chinese boarding schools.

- **Different Stages of Chinese Schools**

There are different ways to translate the stages of Chinese schools (Gu, Ma, and Teng 2017). In this thesis, I use the translation from the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China (2023): Primary school (1st to 6th grade), Junior high school (7th to 9th grade), and Senior high school (10th to 12th grade) to refer to the different stages of Chinese schools. In daily conversations, the grade is usually reset to the 1st grade in a new stage of school. For instance, the 7th grade is often referred to as the first grade in junior high.

- **School Staff**

In boarding schools, there are typically academic teachers responsible for classroom instruction and activities, as well as residential support staff who support and facilitate students' daily lives in the canteen and accommodation. In this thesis, I use the term "staff" to encompass both roles at boarding schools. I use the term "teacher" to refer to academic instructors. In the Chinese language, the word "teacher" can mean more than a person who teaches. In the context of a boarding school, it is common to use the terms "residential teacher" or "life teacher" to describe residential support staff, even if they do not deliver formal teaching. To avoid confusion, I use "boarding staff" to describe this role.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

I have conducted a literature search using PsycINFO, Web of Knowledge, DiscoverEd by Edinburgh University, and Chinese literature from CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure, the largest academic database for Chinese-language scholarly publications). Studies on boarding schools have been conducted by researchers from various disciplines, including psychology, education, sociology, politics, and business.

In this chapter, I present a literature review of English and Chinese studies that focus on boarding schools. I begin with the historical background of boarding schools. In the following section, the review sets out from the perspective of the impact of boarding schools on students (often in comparison to the impact of day schools), which is the main trend in the research on boarding schools. In the last section, I start from the importance of the relational lens of boarders' lives, with theories and understanding from different origins, especially in the Chinese context. I then present a review of research findings on the boarders' relationships with family, peers and staff, with a focus on those relationships in the context of China.

2.1 Background and Context

2.1.1 Historical Background

Boarding schools in the Western tradition originated from the rule and monasticism of St Benedict (480-547 AD), followed by the foundation of Eton by Henry VI in 1440 and the English Benedictine Abbey at Downside in 1605 (White 2004). From the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, boarding schools in Europe became widespread as an important part of education for students from all backgrounds (Kashti 1988). Gradually, boarding schools were inclined to serve paying students, and eventually, they were considered a privileged means of education, reflecting the social and financial status of their students (James 2023). Apart from providing private elite education, boarding schools have also been established in recent years to enhance the academic performance of disadvantaged students, such as the SEED boarding schools in the US and boarding schools of excellence in France, which serve

students from underrepresented ethnic communities and economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Behaghel, de Chaisemartin, and Gurgand 2017).

In China, the prototype of boarding schools can be traced back to the Han Dynasty's 'Taixue', an institution with residential facilities established by the Emperor Ping of Han in the capital to select talented individuals across the country in 3 AD, which represented the boarding form of schools in ancient China until the end of Qing dynasty in 1912 (Dong 2012). Although boarding schools have long existed and played important roles in the talent selection process, the boarding quality of those schools is rarely mentioned or discussed as a concept throughout China's history, which could indicate the ordinariness of this form of school in China. As society continues to evolve, the scale of the education system has expanded substantially, leading to ongoing transformations in the structure and function of boarding schools. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, boarding schools became more common in rural areas to mitigate the substantial distance to schools (Ge 2009). There are also urban boarding schools that cater to middle-class families seeking intensive academic training and discipline, such as the Beijing Primary School, the biggest public boarding school established by the Beijing Municipal Party Committee in the early days of New China, which was founded in 1949 (Gu, Ma, and Teng 2017). In the 1990s, as the effects of the family planning policy gradually became apparent, urbanisation accelerated, and a large amount of the labour force flowed into big cities. As a result, the number of school-age children continued to decrease, and the policy of consolidating and merging schools began to be implemented (Yang and Yan 2022), which meant merging schools in areas with fewer students to consolidate them into schools covering a larger area. Specifically, schools in areas with fewer students were closed, and students and teachers were merged into other schools. Boarding was often offered due to the long distance between school and home, which became a common arrangement, especially in rural areas (Yang and Yan 2022). According to the latest figures from 2021 by the Chinese Ministry of Education (2022), there are more than 52 million boarding students at primary and secondary schools, which comprise over 28% of all students in those schools.

2.1.2 Chinese Contexts

- **Gaokao and Competitiveness**

The Gaokao, China's National College Entrance Examination, is taken by approximately 10 million students annually. Around 40% of students gain admission to colleges, while only slightly more than 1.6% are admitted to top-tier universities (Cheng and Hamid 2025). To describe the extremely selective and competitive exam, Gaokao is also colloquially described as "an army on a single foot log", which depicts a picture of crossing a river: the huge number of exam-takers is like an army, while the chance to access higher education is as narrow as a single foot log (Gu, Ma, and Teng 2017, 112). Many families and students believe that diligent study is the only way to transform their fate (Howlett 2023). Therefore, competitiveness in academic performance is passed from high schools to primary schools and even to kindergartens, with delicate choices of schools and study environments (Gu, Ma, and Teng 2017).

- **Attending Schools Away from Home**

There is a long history of attending schools away from home in China. With the aim of educating students across the country to become officials, the imperial schools such as "Taixue" and "Guozijian" are government-built schools in the capital with different scales of residential facilities depending on the policy (T.H.C. Lee 2000). The non-governmental academies also attracted students and scholars nationwide (T.H.C. Lee 2000). The residence was called "Zhai" in those academies. There were 52 residential units in the famous Yuelu Academy when it was founded (Yuelu Academy 2011). Historically, the pursuit of good schools away from home is commonplace in China. Facing the pressures of the Gaokao, many parents and students chose the best available school nearby, which sometimes meant attending a boarding school (Howlett 2023).

- **One-Child Policy**

In the late 1970s, the Chinese government realised that the population could exceed the country's affordability and subsequently implemented the one-child policy in the early 1980s, limiting each married couple to a maximum of one child, with a few exemptions (L. Li et al. 2020). As a result, over 90% of urban children were only children in the early 1990s (Jiao, Ji, and Jing 1996). To reverse the declining national

birth rate, the Chinese government allowed and encouraged couples to have two children in 2016 and further softened the limit to three children in 2021 (Su-Russell and Sanner 2023). As a result, many only-children had no siblings at home, which limited their contact with peers of a similar age. Because of the limitation, the parents and grandparents treated their precious only (grand)children as “little emperors” through increased time, money and efforts invested (Deutsch 2006, 369). On the other hand, those only children also carried all the expectations from their family members as the only offspring of their parents (L. Li et al. 2020).

- **Left-behind Children**

In the late 1980s, driven by rural unemployment, poverty, and the expansion of urban economies, large numbers of rural labourers migrated to cities. However, due to regional restrictions on school enrollment and limited financial resources, many were compelled to leave their children behind in rural areas (Shu Wang 2024). By 2020, the number of left-behind children in China had reached 66.93 million, accounting for 22.48% of the country’s total child population (National Bureau of Statistics of China, UNICEF China, and UNFPA China 2023). Left-behind children usually live with their grandparents or other relatives, and a few of them live alone (Tong 2016). Synthesising 27 studies, C. Zhou, Sylvia, et al. (2015)’s meta-analysis indicated that left-behind children performed as well as or better than children living with both parents in nine indicators of health, nutrition, and education. Chen et al. (2020)’s meta-analysis of 90 studies, on the other hand, showed that compared to non-left-behind children, rural left-behind children are more disadvantaged regarding child safety and psychological adjustment, among whom mother-absent children were affected the most.

- **Collectivism in Chinese Schools**

In the portraits of Chinese schools depicted by Gu, Ma, and Teng (2017), the class at school played an essential role in forming a collective identity. Most students in China are allocated to a fixed class after enrollment. The students form a class collective group managed by a headteacher. The students in one class usually study in a fixed classroom, and they have class meetings, attend sports and artistic events together as a class collective. In each class, students also elect class cadres to assist the headteacher in managing and supporting their classmates.

2.2 The Impact of Boarding School

In the academic field of boarding schools, my review of the literature shows a trend to investigate the impact of boarding on students. Focusing on various aspects, these studies aim to assess the effectiveness and the validity of boarding schools. In the quantitative realm, the researchers are prone to conduct comparisons of measurements between day schools and boarding schools. Qualitative researchers focus on the impact experienced by (ex)boarders. This section unfolds along the thread of the impact of boarding schools, providing reviews of quantitative and qualitative research, followed by a critical discussion of current research projects in each section.

2.2.1 Quantitative Findings

Review

Research on boarding schools primarily employs quantitative methods to investigate the impact of attending boarding schools on boarders. The results are mixed in different aspects. The researchers from the field of economics of education focus on the education policies and disadvantaged students. Foliano, Green, and Sartarelli (2019) investigate the academic performance of a boarding school that admits an unusually high share of pupils with low socio-economic status in comparison to a comparable day school in England. They find that students who attended boarding schools had a higher probability of getting A and A* in their tests. Although they cannot separately quantify the effect of boarding from pupil ability selection or school resources, they believe that boarding is an important part of the explanation for the difference between exam performances. They also claim boarding is a “simple setting” to isolate the effect of school-based intervention as the parental inputs are low for all boarders (Foliano, Green, and Sartarelli 2019, 12). Despite its claim to be the first to study the effect of boarding education in England, the study does not clearly define what boarding entails or represents. The lack of conceptual clarification limits the study’s ability to examine the underlying mechanisms.

Behaghel, de Chaisemartin, and Gurgand (2017)’s research is about the “boarding schools of excellence” in France, which are schools that serve relatively high ability students from poor families introduced by policy makers. In their research, the

boarding school setting means “smaller classes, more engaged teachers, better peers, less classroom disruption, and more mandatory time spent each day in a study room” for boarders compared to the students in day schools (Behaghel, de Chaisemartin, and Gurgand 2017, 141). Because of the oversubscription of this boarding school in Paris, the school applied a lottery for enrolment, and the lottery winners and losers were compared in this study. The result shows that boarding school increases students’ math test scores. Although the researchers claim that “this is an opportunity to learn the effects of substituting school to home” (Behaghel, de Chaisemartin, and Gurgand 2017, 162), I think it tends to be a mix of the effect of boarding settings and a better study environment. Moreover, there is a lack of consideration of the psychological impact of the enrollment results on students. Their results also demonstrate that the increase in scores does not appear until the end of the second year. They attribute the delayed increase to the separation from family and friends, and the adaptation time needed in the boarding environment, based on the decrease in well-being of boarders.

On the other hand, Z. Zhu, Li, and Song (2019) investigate 137 rural boarding schools under the policy of consolidating and merging schools due to the decrease in birth rate affected the one-child policy in China. Their results demonstrate the negative impact of boarding schools on the capacity for reading comprehension. The negative impact is more significant on the students who are boys, from high socio-economic status families, with highly educated mothers, and from underdeveloped regions. They infer that the poor conditions in rural boarding schools and the absence and loss of support due to separation from families lead to the negative impact. There is a lack of clarification of the boarding as the vital variation in this study. They claim that the 137 schools are all boarding schools, but only 65% the students in this study are boarding. The boarding can stand for the boarding school environment the students were in, the boarding experience the students had, or the boarding conditions when the survey was conducted.

From a psychological perspective, researchers from psychology and education backgrounds focus more on boarders’ well-being and developmental measurements. Based on a sample from 12 Australian high schools, Martin et al. (2014)’s study investigates the difference between boarding (28%) and day (72%) students, which

shows some modest positive results favouring boarding students, including adaptive motivation, academic buoyancy, meaning and purpose, life satisfaction, participation in extracurricular activity, and parent relations. Having conducted a longitudinal design, they find a decline in absenteeism from school and an increase in extracurricular activity for boarders over a year in comparison to day students. They also emphasise the importance of controlling for relevant covariates, such as age and parental education, in order to obtain a less confounded estimate of the effect of boarding, identified from variation in outcomes net of these background characteristics. This process not only controls for confounding but also actively shapes what “boarding” means analytically. By defining parental education as a covariate, the effect of boarding on students is quantified net of parental education, even though parental education may itself constitute one of the factors motivating families to send students to boarding schools in this particular context.

Mander, Lester, and Cross (2015)’s research also focuses on the psychological well-being of boarders in Australia. They investigate the differences in experiencing emotional and social difficulties for boarders and non-boarders in their transitions from primary schools to secondary schools. The results show that boarding students reported experiencing a significantly higher incidence rate of emotional difficulties and greater levels of depression, anxiety and stress than non-boarders. The researchers are vague about the transitions. From this paper, the boarding status of students cannot be inferred for the pre and post transition of schools, which confuses the comparison between boarding and non-boarding students. Furthermore, the transition from primary school to secondary school itself is a very complicated process, which includes more than the change of school environment.

The primary quantitative studies show mixed results in the comparison between day schools and boarding schools. Synthesising 49 primary studies published between 1986 and 2023 through a quantitative meta-analysis, Zhong, Feng, and Xu (2024) examines the impact of boarding school on students across four developmental dimensions: cognitive, behavioural, affective and attitudinal, and physical. Their findings reveal that boarding school has no significant predictive effect on students’ overall development, but it is a significant positive predictor of cognitive development

and a significant negative predictor of affective and attitudinal development (Zhong, Feng, and Xu 2024).

Discussion

To acquire general knowledge of the impact of boarding school, quantitative studies typically use boarding status as the sole independent variable to examine its effects on various aspects of student development, aiming to investigate the causality. The quantitative results, in this sense, offer general descriptions of the status of boarding schools in a certain region, such as Martin et al. (2014)'s large-scale quantitative research on the Australian boarding schools. The considerable number of studies focusing on boarding schools reflects the need to explore boarding school experiences, as the role of which is changing in different cultural, social, and historical phases. From this perspective, quantitative studies also serve as a reference for policy-making to evaluate boarding schools for disadvantaged students in France (Behaghel, de Chaisemartin, and Gurgand 2017) and boarding schools established during the process of consolidating and merging schools in China (Z. Zhu, Li, and Song 2019).

However, the complex interactions and rich contexts of the boarding school experience are simply packed into a single factor and reduced to whether a student attends a boarding school. The mixed results of the impact of boarding schools could also suggest a simplification of the boarding school factors and the dismissal of contexts. It is also obvious that in different political and regional contexts, boarding is defined differently in studies, which leads to the exclusion and inclusion of different components related to boarding schools into the boarding factor. Moreover, as argued by Freeman (2007) psychometric scales limit access to relational experiences and the shifting unconscious, affective, and cognitive relational dynamics are challenging to render with language or precise terminology required by positivist paradigms. Dominant quantitative research reveals the need to shift the focus from measuring the impact of boarding schools to the richness of the experiences themselves. Rather than treating the boarding school as a single factor, incorporating the various components that comprise the boarding school experience into research is needed. Additionally, the review also highlights the oversight of immeasurable aspects and the nuanced

interactions of boarding school experiences, which could also benefit the practice of counselling and psychotherapy.

2.2.2 Qualitative Findings

Review

Schaverien develops the concept of “Boarding School Syndrome” from her therapy clients’ experiences in British boarding schools to describe “learned behaviours and emotional states that may follow growing up in a boarding school” (2015, 2). Her writing features a negative stance towards boarding schools derived from the painful experience of her clients. Duffell writes about his own and clients’ experiences of British boarding schools to disclose the sufferings and trauma caused by attending boarding school (Duffell 2000; Duffell and Basset 2016). He also links boarding school experiences to leaders who attended elite boarding schools in the UK (Duffell 2016). I think both researchers focuses on the conflict between privileged status and the traumatic experience of the boarders of British boarding school well, resonating with many ex-boarders. However, with the aim of elucidating the syndrome and establishing a universal guide to therapeutic work for boarding school students, both researchers only draw from the experiences of people who felt distressed and went to therapy, which creates a selective set of narratives of the boarding school experience. Despite using British clients’ experience in a certain period of time, they also expand the conclusions to boarding schools with different settings, in different cultural, historical and political contexts.

As a teacher and researcher, White (2004) draws on the boarders’ memoirs to investigate the boarding school environment in an Australian boarding school. The researcher presents an overview of the boarding school and what a student’s day was like there. The majority of respondents believe that the boarding school had a positive impact on their ability to ‘get ahead’ after school. The thematic results show that boarders view boarding houses as their second home, coexisting with their family. The experience of boarding school is significant in fostering independence and an attitudinal shift towards embracing multiculturalism. This piece of research demonstrates a contextulised understanding of this boarding school in a specific context in Australia especially in terms of its colonial background. However, the split

of responses from different interviewees lacks consistency and continuity of one boarder.

To investigate the school life of young boarding students, Pang (2022) conducts a case study of a rural boarding school in China, using interviews with students and teachers, observation of boarding school interactions and a survey of parents' views on boarding. The research presents detailed information on rules, settings, facilities and spaces on campus. The orderly school life is identified as the key element across the different data collected. In a thematic fashion, the results present the positive effect, including contributing to civilisation and socialisation, and the negative effect of concealing individual needs and individual meanings. With some comparison of different views and continuous observation of students and teachers on the same theme, this research investigates the key elements in a rural Chinese boarding school. The lack of relational and interactive perspectives frames the boarding school as an environment in which boarders passively accepted management and education.

Cavenagh, McPherson, and Ogden (2024)'s book collects a set of studies investigating the impact of boarding school on adult psychological well-being and relationships in the UK. The studies are based on interviews and surveys of ex-boarders, and cover themes such as mental health, loneliness, child abuse, eating behaviours and relationships, where the advantages and disadvantages of boarding schools are discussed and weighed. They conclude that "the trauma and misery suffered for their supposed academic and extracurricular privileges appears not to be worth the opportunity cost their parents perceived it would be." (Cavenagh, McPherson, and Ogden 2024, 170). They also claim that family-related factors were dominant across the studies about the impact of boarding school. Therefore, they propose the boarding family syndrome as an alternative to understand the psychological distress brought by boarding school experiences. Despite asserting the significance of family factors on boarders, these sets of studies do not explore the family dynamics, interactions, parenting or boarders' experiences at home.

Discussion

The use of case studies, memoirs, and interviews enables the exploration of details and various aspects of boarding school experiences. Through investigating first-person accounts, the interpretation of qualitative results demonstrates various

effects of boarding schools. It is noticeable that the subjects and contexts are crucial in qualitative research. As Schaverien (2015), Duffell and Basset (2016)'s studies mainly source from traumatised clinical cases in the UK, their results about the boarding schools are pathologising. In Pang (2022)'s study, the school is located in a rural area of China, and the local social environment may suggest the school's role in civilising students. These differing contexts underscore the importance of situating research findings within the specific social and cultural settings in which boarding schools operate.

Most qualitative research adopts a thematic approach to analysing and presenting results, demonstrating the advantages and disadvantages of boarding schools. This approach offers systematic and inductive results, including themes, stages, and models. These concepts are helpful for researchers and readers to quickly understand the features of boarding schools. However, to form those concepts, this process fragments and reassembles the boarding school experience from different respondents. From the presentation, it is difficult to trace and reconnect different aspects of a single respondent. I would argue that those experiences originally belong to each boarder. In the process of thematic data handling, the integrity of experiences of individuals is lost, risking the loss of the interconnectedness of different aspects and the developmental trajectory of a boarder. In the absence of developmental trajectories and individual contexts, the understanding of boarding schools could be blended with developmental and contextual issues. The review of current qualitative research presents the lack of idiographic and holistic perspectives of boarding school experiences.

2.2.3 Discussion of the Impact of Boarding School

To serve different purposes, current research on boarding schools focuses extensively on the evaluation and assessment of boarding schools through investigations of the development, capacity, and experiences of (ex) boarders, which suggests an emphasis on boarding schools rather than boarders as holistic individuals. In the analysis process, the interpretation also heavily leans towards the academic researchers' voice, which leaves little space for the boarders' views of their own experiences. I believe that the boarders are the experts of the contexts of their

experiences, so their process of making sense of experiences is valuable and meaningful.

Therefore, considering the gaps in current research, the present study adopts an idiographic, narrative approach to exploring Chinese boarding school experiences. Rather than reducing participants' experiences to themes, the aim is to present narratives that reflect each boarder's developmental trajectory and sense-making process within their specific social, cultural, and historical contexts.

2.3 Relationships in Chinese Boarding Schools

Throughout the literature review on the topic of boarding schools, relationships are rarely mentioned in Western studies, which is echoed by Pfeiffer, Pinguart, and Krick (2016) in their literature review. However, many Chinese studies have explored and elaborated on various relationships within boarding schools. In the following section, I begin with a demonstration of the necessity of studying relationships in boarding schools, particularly in the Chinese context. I then review research findings on the boarders' relationships with family, peers and staff, with a focus on those relationships in the context of China.

2.3.1 Focus on Relationships

From a developmental perspective, children of school age mainly interact with their family, peers and staff. Bowlby's attachment theory indicates the presence of proximity-seeking behaviour and the importance of the attachment figure (Eagle 2013). Research shows that teacher-child relationships may have an attachment component, especially for younger or vulnerable children (Verschueren and Koomen 2012). Relationships with peers are also crucial for children, as peers constitute the society of children, where they develop in socialisation (Shaffer and Kipp 2013). The boarding school environment significantly alters students' relationships, limiting their contact with family members while extending their time with peers and staff. According to relationism and relational-development systems proposed by Overton (2013, 102), living organisms are "relational, spontaneously active, complex adaptive systems, that are self-creating, self-organizing and self-regulating". Therefore, it is vital to explore

what role boarding environments play in the dynamic, self-organising processes of relational development in students.

Relationships with others are deeply embedded in Chinese culture. Q. Wang and Conway (2004)'s study about autobiographical memory finds that compared to Americans, Chinese people place a great emphasis on social interactions and significant others in their memory narratives, which could stem from the important roles of group solidarity and interconnectedness in Chinese culture. Shi (2013) also claims that Chinese people tend to construct interdependent selves, which emphasises the mutual dependence between the self and the surrounding environment, as well as the coordination between the individual and others. The others that connect to the self occupy an important place within one's self-concept, with the self being more embedded within social relationships. Shi (2013) continues to argue that the interdependent self is deeply rooted in the Chinese natural economic structure, language, words, myths and legends. Moreover, influential Chinese contexts such as the only-child policy, left-behind children and collective settings at school are embedded in the relationships with family, peers and staff, which necessitate the focus on relationships.

2.3.2 Family Relationships and Chinese Boarding Schools

Family is the first relationship for children, where they experience and understand connections with others. Traditional Chinese values emphasise the self as a part of the family, and their behaviour should be guided by their role responsibilities in the family, which means children need to behave with deference and propriety and fulfil filial piety toward their parents, and parents are responsible for cultivating good moral manners and delivering the Confucius values to their children (Y. Xu and Suh 2022). Chinese parents tend to be authoritative and strict in parenting, and Chinese children often do not perceive strict parenting as negative but as a caring gesture (L. Wang and Fu 2005). The interactions between boarders and their families could be changed by the boarding school settings, which leads to possible changes in boarders' roles in their families or in dynamics in parenting when they spent less time at home.

Research about family relationships of boarders focuses on the limited contact between parents and their children. Yang and Yan (2022)'s quantitative results show

that attending boarding school has a negative impact on student mental health, and the lack of parental contact, as a mediator, can explain the decline in mental health among boarders caused by attending boarding school. In a study about reading ability, X. Li et al. (2018) find boarding has a negative effect on reading ability, but the negative effect of boarding is only significant on children who have both or one parent(s) at home, but not on children who have no parents available at home. Despite the limited access to family in boarding environments, family interactions remain vital for boarders, but the mechanism remains unclear.

To investigate the mechanism of how relationships with parents affect boarders, Cai et al. (2022) find that boarders who contact their parents frequently through phone and social media and perceive higher parental warmth and intimacy are less likely to have rebellious reactions. A. Shen et al. (2021) explore the inconsistency between paternal and maternal communications with boarders and their effect on adaptation to boarding school. The results show that during the limited contact time, boarders' adaptation can be affected by parental inconsistency, including parental conflict, and differences in parenting, which creates confusion in boarders. Those studies show some possible paths of the impact of boarders' family relationships, which offers some insights into boarders' family relationships. However, the quantifying tools limit the depth and the variety of understanding boarders' family relationships.

Kelsang (2019) conducts qualitative interviews with boarders, teachers and school managers in two rural Tibetan boarding schools, where many parents migrate to cities for work. They find that many boarders use snacks from home to show off as a symbol of connections to family, indicating that the connections with family are cherished but rare among boarders. The boarders' parents, on the other hand, complain about the school breaks because they have to give up work and take care of their children. Those results suggest a complicated, interactive relationship between boarders and their parents, which is highly related to the local and political context.

Overall, the research about boarders' family relationships in China focuses on the effect of limited contact at school, which demonstrates the importance of relationships with families. However, there is a lack of exploration of the dynamics and interactions of family relationships in the boarding setting, which could stem from the absence of boarders' accounts at home. Moreover, the current research focuses more

on one specific status of borders' family relationships, without a temporal consideration of the change process in the interactive dynamics.

2.3.3 Staff-Student Relationships and Boarding School

The teacher-student relationship is the foundation of students' school relationships, which is essential for students in their school life and has a great impact on their development. Teacher-student relationships affect students' behaviours, academic performance and interactions with others in class (Zou, Qu, and Ye 2007). In Chinese schools, teachers not only deliver teaching in class but also take on responsibilities for students' school lives, including providing emotional support and maintaining contact with parents. This headteacher is present for all class activities and meetings, and meets with the family members of every student (Gu, Ma, and Teng 2017). This system could work well in day schools as students go home to seek support from their families, and the teacher rests until the next school day. However, in the context of boarding schools, boarders have more support needs due to longer time on campus, and the teachers have longer working hours. To mitigate the lack of support and management in the residential area, most boarding schools have boarding staff to cover the time when teachers are off work.

Z. Zhu, Li, and Song (2019) focus on the impact of the lack of staff and support on boarders in rural Chinese boarding schools using quantitative methods. They conduct surveys to investigate the boarders' cognitive competence (reading performance) and non-cognitive competence (self-esteem, level of depression and resilience) in different boarding schools in China. Their research demonstrates that boarders in schools with more teachers who receive higher education perform better in cognitive competence but worse in non-cognitive competence, which suggests complex dynamics between boarders and teachers. Their results also suggest that a higher ratio of boarding staff to students may mitigate the negative effect of boarding. Therefore, it is vital to investigate the role of teachers and boarding staff separately.

In pursuit of the mechanism of the staff-student relationship, Yi Zhu (2017) conducts qualitative interviews in a rural Chinese boarding school. The interviewed boarders conveyed that their relationships with teachers were heavily connected to their academic performance, and one teacher was very strict in class and used

physical punishment. Yi Zhu (2017, 46) then interviewed this teacher, who responded that they “did not target anyone specifically”; were “strict because her (this boarder’s) overall academic performance was excellent, but the score of one subject consistently pulled down her total”; attributed the boarder’s experiences to her “(emotional) sensitivity due to lack of care from family”. Those accounts show teachers in boarding schools care more about academic performance, which serves as a relational tie in the teacher-student relationship.

In a narrative study, Xiahui Liu (2021) draws from their experience in a Chinese rural primary school by using their teaching notes, working diaries and reflective accounts to demonstrate how they create a spiritual home for the teacher and children by providing emotional support, developmental guidance, residential care and academic encouragement. The narrative shows the different stages and aspects of her work as an “in loco parentis” teacher with reflection. According to them, the reason for the success of teachers’ “In locoparentis” teacher-student relationship is that “teachers are ‘the same as parents’ everywhere’, ‘wider than all parents’ fairness’ and ‘deeper than parents’ professional care’. During this process, teachers should not only have the same simple love as parents, but also learn more professional care than parents, so as to give students the hope of continuous education. In other words, to be a teacher also means being a ‘mother’, who keeps learning the way of both being a teacher and a ‘mother’, promoting the mutual growth of teachers and students.” (Xiahui Liu 2021, VI-VII)

It is evident that the boarding staff-student dynamics are complex because of the extended time in boarding schools for both parties. Expanded responsibilities for teachers, the distinctive role of the boarding staff and the absence of family of boarders converge in boarding schools. However, the staff-student relationships in boarding schools remain understudied, particularly from an interactive perspective. From the existing research, there appears to be a gap between the best practices of teacher-student relationships and the reality of boarding schools. In addition, very few studies cover the boarding staff and their relationships with boarders.

2.3.4 Peer Relationships and Boarding School

Peer relationships are not only an important context for children's social development but also a major component of social development for students (Z. Zhou, Sun, et al. 2015). In the Chinese context, students are grouped together in a collective class for their studies at one school. The allocation and segregation of classes assign a fixed group of classmates to each student, limiting contact with others within the school. In the boarding school environment, there is a lack of family and staff contact, and boarders tend to turn to their peers for support and interaction (Kelsang 2019). Research on peer relationships has a strong focus on bullying, which is common in boarding schools according to Lu, Song, and Liang (2017). In their study of Chinese rural boarding schools, their findings show that boarding students experience significantly more bullying than non-boarding students, and they continue to suggest that frequent contact between boarders can cause bullying behaviours. Research also shows that bullying affects boarders' school bonding, which deteriorates boarders' well-being (Wu, Meng, and Zhou 2022). Boarders suffer more from bullying because there is no escape back to family at the end of the day (Schaverien 2015). On the bright side, strong peer attachment could reduce bullying behaviours (G. Zhu, Chen, and Xuan 2019). Those research findings present the connection between bullying and boarding schools in different dimensions, but there is a lack of continuous, interactive and relational perspective in this research field.

Besides bullying, boarding school settings also affect other elements of peer relationships. For academic performance, Z. Xu (2019) compares the math performance of boarders and non-boarders across six different regions in China, which shows that students in boarding schools are more competitive than those in day schools. The competitive peer dynamic leads to more interest in studying math but more anxiety in boarders. From the psychological and developmental perspective, Zhi and Feng (2019) find that boarders' frequent contact with peers, especially in dormitories, could be more complex and confrontational than non-boarders in rural boarding schools. If this is left unsupported by teachers, boarders could feel more alienated. However, this could also be a chance for development in socialisation. Due to the limited environment in rural regions, some boarders need to share beds with their peers. Shutao Wang and Mao (2015) discover that boarders who share a bed

with others have better social and emotional competence than those who have their own bed at school. Through the review of boarding school research in the British context, James (2023) states that the bond of peers in boarding school is strong, and there is a sense of loyalty to the collective, which could be amplified in the collective groups in Chinese schools.

In the aspect of peer relationships in boarding schools, bullying is a serious and dominant theme. The daily interactions and the mechanisms of relating between peers require further exploration. In addition, I believe that the frequent peer contact and tight class collective group in boarding schools can feel different to boarders, as many of them are only children at home. The detailed and nuanced relational experiences of how only children interact with their peers in the collective environment in the distinctive political and social context of China need exploration.

2.3.5 Discussion of Relationships in Chinese Boarding Schools

As presented in the literature review, quantitative research is dominant in the topic of relationships in Chinese boarding schools. Following a positivist paradigm, the construct of relationship is simplified to numerical scores, generating objective and general forms of knowledge, which may be useful for instrumental purposes with funders and commissioners, but “they are of limited relevance to practitioners in counselling and psychotherapy, for whom sensitivity to the very particular context of each therapeutic relationship is paramount” (Bondi and Fewell 2016, 6).

The literature review following the thread of impact demonstrates a tendency to position boarders as receivers of the impact of boarding schools. In research on relationships, it is also evident that the boarders’ wellbeing and academic performance are regarded as dependent variables, which are hypothesised to be predicted by different aspects of their relationships at school, especially those involving family and staff-student relationships. As Weiner et al. (2012) argues, relationships involving children are bidirectional, and they are active agents in selecting and shaping all their relationships. I wonder how boarders relate to others in Chinese boarding school settings.

Lastly, in current studies, the different relationships of one subject are split and quantified to be investigated as separate variables. The absence of a holistic

illustration of a boarder's different relationships results in dissociated and fragmented knowledge of the interaction between the boarder and the boarding school environment. As Freeman (2007) argues on the significance of others, understanding of human relationships in their whole situations is crucial to understanding an individual. In other words, a comprehensive exploration of each boarder's relationships can enable inquiry into how they perceive, understand, establish, balance and utilise relationships, as well as how they position themselves in different relationships within the boarding school environment.

2.4 Research Rationale

The literature review has demonstrated a focus on the impact of boarding schools on children, primarily in the field of boarding schools, which has mainly leaned towards creating general and causal conclusions, as well as presenting thematic fragments of the boarding school experience.

The significance of relationships is also featured in the boarding school research. However, those studies focus mainly on the general results, suggesting boarders as passive receivers in interactions and ignoring the wholeness and relatedness of different relationships.

In this current research, I intend to explore the Chinese boarding experience through individual narratives. Applying the lens of relationships, I aim to present and analyse the boarders' development trajectories, considering the personal, local, historical, social, and cultural context. With the current research gap and desirable contribution to counselling practice, I aim to explore the relationships of boarders in Chinese boarding schools, including the dynamics, interactions, implications and the role of boarding settings in those relationships.

This thesis sets out to answer two research questions:

- a. How do boarders in China make sense of their boarding school experiences?
- b. Under the setting of Chinese boarding schools, how do boarders relate to others?

2.5 Theoretical Orientation

2.5.1 Positioning Theories

From the literature review, I identify both the lack of and the significant value in presenting the Chinese boarding experiences in their own terms. This project is therefore led by the emergence and unfolding of those experiences, while remaining in dialogue with relevant theoretical perspectives. In this sense, I adopt a narrative orientation that begins with lived experience and weaves the literature and theory throughout the thesis, rather than foregrounding an extended exposition of theoretical frameworks at the outset (Clandinin and Connelly 2000).

This narrative orientation is elaborated further in the methodology and method in action chapters. In my research practice, I engage with literature and theory through revisiting the narratives in which participants and I co-create portraits and understandings of Chinese boarding school experiences. In this way, theories and literature emerge through sustained engagement with narratives, allowing experiences and the sense-making process to be understood within personal, social, cultural, political, and historical contexts. At the same time, I recognise the importance of making the theoretical orientation of the study visible within the literature review.

Through the literature review, it becomes evident that research on boarding schools draws from multiple disciplinary traditions, including psychology, developmental studies, education, economics, and political research. Moreover, the narrative and analytic process brought forward themes and concerns that were not anticipated at the outset of the study. As participants' accounts converged and diverged, a number of theoretical perspectives became salient as interpretive resources. These perspectives are introduced here to situate the study within a clearer theoretical context.

2.5.2 Relational Perspectives

The literature review has demonstrated the importance of the lens of relationships in boarding school experience, especially in the context of China. Hence, the use of relational perspectives in theories naturally comes into my analysis. This research is enlightened by Freeman (2007)'s argument about the importance of others and relations in narrative. Following Finlay and Evans (2009)'s advocacy of the

significance of relationality in counselling originated from dialogical gestalt psychotherapy, existential phenomenology, intersubjectivity theory and relational psychoanalysis, I am aware of the psychological significance of relationships in individuals. Specifically, I draw on relational approaches in counselling, namely psychodynamic perspectives (Spurling 2017) and person-centered theories (Mearns, Thorne, and McLeod 2013) in analysis to work with the narratives. I also elaborate on the lens of relationship from a philosophical perspective in the methodology chapter at 3.4.

2.5.3 Psychodynamic Perspectives

As stated in the research rationale, the experience of Chinese boarding schools is at the core of this thesis. I intend to set out from the personal account to explore the relational, cultural, and political elements of boarding school. Therefore, psychodynamic perspectives originating from psychoanalysis offer me the lens to start understanding participants' subjectivity and relationality in their experiences of Chinese boarding schools. Adapting to different facets of narratives from participants, I use Freudian, Kleinian and attachment theories which are widely used in studies of schools and childhood (McLoughlin 2008; Eagle 2013; Spurling 2017). Specifically, I use the Freudian perspectives to understand the defences participants use to adapt to new environments and Kleinian ideas to analyse the emotional experience when participants were in extreme adversity, which facilitates the exploration of Chinese boarding school settings.

2.5.4 Developmental Perspectives

In this project, I intend to explore the Chinese boarding school experience with narratives from ex-boarders. Developmental perspectives are therefore relevant to this study as a contextual orientation for understanding boarding school experiences as experiences of childhood. Schools are institutions organised around children and adolescents, including their practices, expectations, and routines, which are shaped by assumptions about maturity and development. Attending to developmental perspectives allows the study to situate boarding school life within the social and

institutional context of childhood, recognising that children's capacities and relationalities differ from those of adults.

In the analysis, I stay attuned to the participants' narrative closely and draw from a wide range of developmental perspectives, which include the psychodynamic, especially attachment theory (Eagle 2013) to understand the relational needs of family, peers and staff in different parts of the participants' own maturity trajectories. From the perspective of developmental psychology, the analysis is also inspired by Weiner et al. (2012)'s theoretical understanding of school as a developmental context and their understanding of parent-child relationship as bidirectional rather than unilateral. However, the aim to challenge the singular boarding school narrative of this research is in accordance with Burman (2024)'s critique of developmentalists' theories as linear, singular trajectory modelled. Hence, I do not simply apply one set of theoretical framework on all my participants in terms of their developmental trajectories. Instead, I engage with relevant theories from different perspectives to speak to specific narratives.

2.5.4 Social and Cultural

As an important context of this project, it is vital that I demonstrate and discuss the Chinese context of the boarding schools. Because the participants and I share the Chinese background, certain aspects of the context of schooling are implicitly understood and do not always require explicit articulation during the interviews. However, the research is conducted and presented within a UK academic context, where such assumptions cannot be taken for granted. Therefore, the differentiation and elucidation of the underlying socio-cultural context of Chinese boarding schools is essential before analysing the narratives. To achieve this, I draw on a range of materials related to Chinese schooling, especially the work of Gu, Ma, and Teng (2017), which portrays different aspects of Chinese schools from multiple perspectives.

The narratives about Chinese boarding schools in this project illustrate routinely ordinary, lived experiences of boarding schools, rather than dramatic and miserable experiences. This finding is in accordance with Lefebvre (2014)'s critique of everyday life, which foregrounds the ordinary, repetitive, and habitual dimensions of lived experience that are often overlooked in favour of dramatic or spectacular narratives.

From a relational perspective, it is also evident how “ordinary relationships” and “being there” are significant elements for boarders(Brownlie 2014, 2,131).

Chapter 3 Methodology

In this chapter, I endeavour to illustrate my understanding of experience and connect it to the subject of Chinese boarding schools. Then, I demonstrate the ontological, epistemological and methodological ideas I engage with to provide a rationale for approaching the knowledge of the Chinese boarding school experience in this research.

3.1 On Researching Experience

My understanding of experience is grounded in Dewey (1958)'s work on this subject. He argues that

“experience includes what men do and suffer, what they strive for, love, believe, and endure, and how men act and are acted upon, the ways in which they do and suffer, desire and enjoy, see, believe, imagine – in short, processes in experiencing.”(1958, 8)

Dewey's words stress the multifaceted range of experience and the totality of daily encounters. In the context of boarding school, the experience encompasses students' studies, interests, ambitions, struggles, leisure activities, adaptation, acceptance, rebellion, and interactions with peers, lovers, staff, and others. Beyond those, boarding schools' provision of living spaces, meals, and fixed schedules, along with the underlying values and cultures, permeate boarders' everyday lives, which results in changes in their lifestyle rhythm, including the limited contact with family, long hours spent with peers and frequent shifts between school and home environments and so on. Hence, the boarding school experience encompasses not only students' time at school but also their experiences at home and during holidays.

As mentioned in the literature review, some researchers focus on a singular aspect, such as the mathematical performance or mental well-being of boarders (Yang and Yan 2022; Z. Xu 2019). Since the boarders spend much time in boarding school with different tasks and activities. The experience of boarding school, to me, means more than just a section of study experience or psychological impact; it represents an integrated process of learning, interacting, and developing. Some researchers focus

on how boarders suffer and react based on case studies with counselling clients (Schaverien 2015; Duffell and Basset 2016). I intend to, however, embrace the boarders' experience with their ways of experiencing boarding schools, which might include suffering, enjoyment, and the ordinary and mundane. By understanding the totality of experience, we can approach how the boarders perceive, adapt to, or live with the boarding school settings. Without such a comprehensive perspective, we risk reducing their lived experience to isolated problems or outcomes. A fragmented or pathologising view can obscure how boarders themselves make meaning of their environment, limiting our ability to respond meaningfully to their needs.

From a temporal perspective, the experience "is always in the midst and it is shaped in the making and remaking, in the recollecting of what is past, but also in what continues to live on in future moments." (Caine, Clandinin, and Lessard 2022, 20) The continuity quality of experience reveals the significance of including not only the period of attending boarding school but also the past and the future. In the context of this project, understanding the past, including their family environment and previous school experiences, can provide a foundation for understanding their perceptions and preferences in study, activities, and interactions with others in boarding schools. The future, which temporally means the time after boarding school, can serve as a stance to interpret and/or remake their experience in boarding school. For instance, the rules and schedules could be understood as strict or organised for boarders when boarding, but those could later be interpreted as healthy, habitual or compulsive. Additionally, by examining the past and future, I can explore how certain aspects of boarding school experiences are either integrated or resisted. In other words, considering experiences within a broader timeframe allows for investigating the interactions between boarding and the daily lives of boarders.

3.2 Ontological Stance

My ontological stance as a qualitative researcher is social constructionism. I believe that experience is situated within its social, historical and cultural context (Harper 2011). As the main theme of this project, boarding school is a social construct developed to serve specific needs in educational institutions, inherently shaped by its social, historical, and cultural background. Sharing the boarding setting, a private

boarding school in the UK could represent the upper class and elite education (James 2023), while a Native American boarding school might serve the purpose of removing Indigenous culture and language (D.W. Adams 2020). Therefore, contexts are closely tied to boarding schools, which permeate the campus, curriculum, and interactions between staff and students. The Chinese boarding school, although adopting similar boarding settings and schedules, is deeply rooted in the context of China, such as the competitive study environment, the one-child policy, and the increasing number of left-behind children. Nonetheless, there are many different contexts in China. The differences between urban and rural, public and private and local and ethnic culture are important in understanding the settings of boarding schools.

Boarders, on the other hand, also come with their backgrounds. As Caine, Clandinin, and Lessard (2022, 18) argue, “when attending to experience, we can not turn away from the social, cultural, political and historical positions we occupy and that shape each of our lives.” Throughout their childhood, boarders are shaped by their material environment, relationships and daily encounters. As a result, boarders also attend to their experience in boarding school with their subjective interpretation embedded in the social and personal context. For instance, as R.G. Adams and Allan (1999) suggested, understanding and experience of friendship are embedded in its context at the personal environment level, network level, community or subcultural level, and societal level. For boarders, their friendships at school may be shaped by their gender, family network relational patterns, school or local norms and the economic and social structure in China.

Furthermore, the boarding school experience not only reflects the encounter of environment and individual but also implies the convergence and friction of the social, cultural, and historical contexts of both the boarding school and its students. A boarder who is the only child and rebellious in the family could enjoy the rich extracurricular activities and peer relationships offered by an open-minded boarding school. On the other hand, a boarder who is very closely attached to their relaxed family environment could be anxious about separation and rules at a scrutinising boarding school. Additionally, the interaction between boarders and the boarding school is not a fixed state but a dynamic process. Within the boarding school setting, boarders may adjust their preferences, lifestyles, and even aspects of their personalities in response to the

surrounding environment. At the same time, the school, staff, and peers may also shift and adapt through their ongoing interactions with each individual boarder. Therefore, the construction of the boarding school experience is both interactive and temporal.

Grounded in a social constructionist ontology, I view experience not as a fixed or objective reality, but as something continuously shaped by social, cultural, and historical forces (Harper 2011). Instead of assuming the boarders as the receiver of the impact from the boarding school environment, I am interested in how boarders make sense of their lived experiences within the boarding school setting, and specifically, how they interpret, negotiate, and narrate their daily lives in relation to their unique social contexts. Because both the institution and the individual are embedded in layered contexts, including national policies and cultural norms, as well as family dynamics and personal histories, I aim to understand how boarders experience and engage with these overlapping contexts, which allows us to explore the dynamic, evolving relationship between self and environment.

3.3 Epistemological Framework

I adopt the idea of Bruner (1979, 120) about knowledge as “a model we construct to give meaning and structure to regularities in experience.” In this sense, human experience is like raw material, while the construction of knowledge is tied to the formation of meaning and structure. To understand experience in this study, I endorse the narrative mode of thought proposed by Bruner (1985) as my epistemological stance of ordering experience, of constructing reality, which “concerned with meanings that are ascribed to experiences through stories” (Caine, Clandinin, and Lessard 2022, 35). In the context of this study, there are many moments, thoughts, events and encounters in the boarding school experience, which are the raw material in the process of constructing knowledge. Through narrating, those moments of studying, living on campus, and interactions with others become integral parts of how the boarders perceive, understand and adapt to the boarding school setting. For example, “saying goodbye to my parents” and “chatting with peers” are unprocessed materials. When they are connected in narration as “After the boring weekend, I say goodbye to my parents so that I can chat with my peers at school” or “I say goodbye to my parents so I can only chat with my peers at school until the next Friday”, meaning

is ascribed to these materials through the process of narration. In this way, the knowledge about the boarding school experience is constructed.

I would also argue that the retrospective nature of meaning and the temporal structure of narration are closely aligned in the process of knowledge construction. As stated by Ricoeur (2016, 170), “An important action, we could say, develops meanings which can be actualised or fulfilled in situations other than the one in which this action occurred.” In terms of the boarding school experience, for example, it could be mundane to have three meals with peers collectively on weekdays at school. The meaning or importance of this action may become apparent in eating habits, socialising patterns, and so on, which cannot be fulfilled in the boarding school but can be actualised when the boarders attend university or in their relationships with others. Therefore, the narrative process of recollecting the past can offer a lens through which to see the reverberation of the experience (Freeman 2015). As an ongoing and ubiquitous process, the narrative way of meaning-making is constantly applied and revised to help boarders navigate social encounters in boarding schools, which could provide a means to investigate the process of changing and adapting.

The narrative epistemological framework also implies that I engage with people’s narrating capacity to construct integrative and meaningful products attributed to their experiences because they are experts in their own experiences within their specific contexts (Anderson 2012). As stated in the ontological stance, experience is situated in the social, historical, and cultural context. The narratives, which are born, grow, and live in culture, mirror the culture and society wherein the narratives are created and told (McAdams 2008a). Therefore, through narrating, boarders can construct and integrate meaning, which is not only personal but also social, historical and cultural. For instance, the narrative of missing home can represent personal emotions; it can also reflect the boarder’s context of family, collective behaviours of peers, school ethos, and even national educational policies.

3.4 A Relational Lens

As discussed in the literature review, the lens of relationships is significant in the research field of boarding schools. I would like to demonstrate the importance of

introducing the lens of relationships in the knowledge creation process from a philosophical perspective.

According to Finlay and Evans (2009, 30), “the central significance of the relationship and the recognition of the co-created nature of the human encounter together comprise the most influential ideas in contemporary psychotherapy” including dialogical gestalt psychotherapy, existential phenomenology, intersubjectivity theory and relational psychoanalysis. As a psychodynamic counsellor, I am immersed in the relational psychoanalysis philosophy, which values the importance and therapeutic effect of interpersonal relationships (Spurling 2017). I learned from Winnicott’s claim, “there is no such thing as a baby, (1990, 39)” and Bowlby’s attachment theory (1969) that maternal relationships are essential for children. Therefore, relationships are central from the beginning of people’s lives. As a person interacts with others, the person “becomes conscious of himself as participating in being, as being-with and thus as a being.” (Buber 1970, 115) It appears that “being-with” provides a conducive environment for the processes of self-reflection and meaning-making to unfold. In the context of boarding schools, boarders make sense of their experience in their interactions with others. The social construction in boarding schools, such as school rules, schedules and separation from family, is enacted in relationships, especially for boarders surrounded by peers at school.

I would also argue that relationships foreground different contexts in the meaning-making process. The person-centred idea of configurations of self suggests a more dynamic and multifaceted understanding of the self, indicating an individual’s possession of multiple self-configurations that emerge in different contexts and relationships (Mearns et al. 2000). Therefore, inviting different configurations through different relational lenses to understand the multifaceted self is crucial. In the context of boarding schools, boarders could form different configurations shaped by their relationships with family, peers, and staff. For instance, separation from family can also mean reunion with peers and staff, which is an integrated process while shifting environments. Focusing solely on family relationships could limit the boarders’ reflection and expression of their response to leaving home, ignoring the reconnection to the relationships at boarding schools.

As Freeman (2007) argues,

“Efforts to measure relationships, although they have produced large bodies of research studies, inevitably simplify and decontextualise relationships. Relationships require narrative to evoke the empathy and multilayered attention necessary for one person to have some sense of the nature of someone else’s relational experience.” (p.4)

I also contend that narrative is well-suited and indispensable to the lens of relationship for making sense of lived experience. Quantitative researchers who use the relational lens to understand the boarding school experience can only focus on one dimension or specific quality of relationships, such as perceived parental warmth (H. Li, Que, and Huang 2021), parental communication (A. Shen et al. 2021), peer attachment and bullying (G. Zhu, Chen, and Xuan 2019) , due to the restrictions of psychometric scales and experimentation. The nuanced details, rich backgrounds and holistic continuity of relationships are lost in the simplification and decontextualisation. Studying boarding school experience through narrative, however, enables access to the depth and meaning of family relationships, peer relationships and relationships with staff of boarders, through which the investigation into the process and construction of relational experience is possible (Freeman 2007).

3.5 Methodological Considerations

3.5.1 Methodological Commonplaces

In alignment with this study’s ontological and epistemological foundations, I employ narrative as my research methodology. This methodological stance implies that experience is meaningful, “but the meaning is implicit and can become explicit in narrative and through narration.” (Goodson and Gill 2011, 5) In this study, I invite participants to narrate their experiences and collaborate with them to think about experiences narratively across all stages of the research, which entails thinking within three commonplaces: temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin 2022). In the following paragraphs, I elaborate on these commonplaces in relation to how boarders make sense of their Chinese boarding school experience and how they relate to others.

- **Temporality**

Attending to the temporality resonates with the temporal quality of narrative, which means that time is not an isolated phenomenon but is intrinsically linked with narrative. As time plays a vital role in ordering experiences within the narrative process, thinking with the temporal dimension is essential for meaning-making (Labov and Waletzky 1997). In the context of the current study, the temporal stages of boarding life and the particular moments at which events unfold are keys to making sense of the experience. Attending to macro-temporality can situate the experience in a specific socioeconomic phase or the developmental stages of boarders. The micro-temporality allows the identification and construction of causal, parallel connections across events.

Additionally, temporality indicates engagement with the past, the present and the future, which includes both actual encounters and reflective accounts of experiences. For instance, a boarder experienced weekly separation from family and was sad about it then. They could now maintain a separate relationship with their family without harbouring hard feelings, and continue to envision separating from their family as a norm. Based on the social constructionist perspective, the temporal marks show the construction process of the meaning of separation from home in specific contexts. Without particular temporal information, the meaning embedded in the narration process may be distorted or misrepresented. Therefore, engagement with temporality is essential across the research process.

- **Sociality**

When introducing the sociality commonplace in narrative methodology, Clandinin (2022, 24) states that “social conditions are understood, in part, in terms of cultural, social, institutional, familial and linguistic narratives.” The sociality aligns with my ontological stance, which incorporates social constructionist ideas into the narrative process. In the context of the boarding school experience, these contexts range from the broad Chinese culture, social, economic, and educational background to the specific family tradition, local environment, school culture, class, and even within small peer groups. Hence, attending to those aspects in the narration process is vital to confirm the specific context in which the boarder is/was situated. Moreover, I am concerned with the narrator’s stance in those contexts. The context does not dictate how it shapes the boarder, as they can choose to comply with, rebel against, or find

peace with the context. Therefore, attending to sociality requires an attentive inquiry into the contexts within the narrative process.

- **Place**

According to Clandinin (2022), the place as a commonplace in narrative methodology emphasises the recognition that events all take place in specific, concrete, physical, and topological boundaries of place or sequences of places. This research focuses on boarding schools, where boarders live, study, and interact. As I argue about the scope of the experience, the permeation of boarding school settings into boarders' lives demonstrates the importance of including boarders' experience off campus. Narrating the nuances in different places, both on and off campus, enriches the meaning-making process of the boarding school experience. For instance, the boarders may act differently or similarly in classrooms, dormitory rooms, and canteens, depending on the specific interactions, tasks and rules in those places. The experience at home, on the other hand, may reveal family dynamics more clearly due to the limited contact with family.

As narrated in case studies by Schaverien (2015), Duffell and Basset (2016), the moment of attending boarding school is often depicted in emotionally rich detail. From the perspective of place, this scene signifies a shift between places and implies a transition in interactive subjects and relational dynamics. I agree that the change of places serves as a significant point of departure for narration, particularly in the context of Chinese boarding schools, where weekly routines involve constant and regular movement between home and school. However, there is a lack of accounts of arriving home or the journeys between home and boarding school. The narration in those places can enrich the understanding of how boarders experience and negotiate relational belonging across the shifting places.

3.5.2 Narrative Interview

Having demonstrated the methodological orientations, I move to clarify the process of narrative construction in this research. Due to the lack of accounts of Chinese boarding school experiences, I intend to conduct interviews with participants who have such experiences. According to Riessman (2008, 62), the narrative, interviewing entails “two active participants who jointly construct narrative and

meaning.” With the social constructionist view, I believe that narrative is co-constructed between the researcher and the participant with their social, historical and cultural contexts embedded in a relational process of unfolding. The narrative epistemology I endorse implies the value of meaning-making through individual narration. Therefore, in the narrative interview, I am interested in meaning-making in an idiographic and exploratory sense, rather than generating nomothetic, deductive, or generalised knowledge (Josselson and Hammack 2021). To facilitate the narration process, I recognise three important roles of the researcher: establishing a collaborative relationship, encouraging narrative expression and thinking closely with the research topic.

As Anderson (2012) suggests, the participant brings their expertise on themselves and their experiences. The researcher, on the other hand, needs to create space and process the relationships and conversations, which resonates with my belief in people’s capacity to narrate their own experiences. Anderson (2012) continued to argue that practices like research do not need to be sacred events but can be naturally occurring interactional talks. Therefore, in the interview relationships with participants, I need to stay open to their ways of unfolding stories, including respecting the narrating process, embracing spontaneity and uncertainty, and understanding the inherent coherence and incoherence of the presented narrative (Clandinin 2022). Accordingly, it requires that the narrative researcher hold the research question as a framework rather than tightly structuring the interview (Josselson and Hammack 2021, 43). Given my research questions—how borders in China make sense of their boarding school experiences and how they relate to others within that setting—this approach means creating a space that supports participants in making meaning through storytelling. I also use gentle prompts to elicit narratives around different relationships, allowing participants to narrate and reflect at their own pace.

Slembrouck (2015) argues that the narrative should not be taken for granted, as the interviewees may not embrace the choice to tell an experiential story in their own terms. Therefore, I believe narrative interviewers carry the responsibility to encourage narrative expression. From the perspective of research design, an intention to explore should be reflected in the research question and the questions posed during

the interview. For instance, the use of open questions and follow-up with “Can you remember a particular time when...?” after a general answer is helpful (Riessman 2008). During the interview process, adopting an appropriate listening stance and providing minimal encouragement can also show the researcher’s acceptance of the participant’s “narrative lead” (Slembrouck 2015, 247).

Because the interview is research-oriented, the questions are used when research themes are not adequately addressed in the narrative (Josselson and Hammack 2021). In this current research, the lens of three different kinds of relationships (family relationships, peer relationships and staff-child relationships) is at the core of my research design, which I need to address in the interviews when necessary. It is also essential to understand the contexts of the participants’ family conditions, the boarding schools they attended, and the timeline of their boarding experience, as suggested in the literature review. Therefore, I believe the semi-structured interview is well-suited for my research.

3.5.3 Reflexivity and Positionality

Grounded in the social constructionist ontological stance adopted in this research, I view both my participants and myself as shaped by the specific social, cultural, and historical contexts in which we are situated. Knowledge, from this perspective, is co-constructed between the researcher and the participant within these contexts. Accordingly, the narratives and understandings generated in this study do not represent a universal truth about Chinese boarding schools or the relationships of boarders. I acknowledge that in the qualitative realm, “research is co-constituted, a joint product of the participants, researcher and their relationship” (Finlay 2002, 212). Therefore, it is essential for researchers to recognise their own positionality and the influence it exerts on all stages of the research process (Finlay 2002). From my perspective, positionality not only helps me to stay aware of the assumptions and potential impositions I bring to the research but also provides a contextual frame for participants and readers in their engagement with this piece of research. To approach my positions in the research, I adopt reflexivity as a methodological practice. Reflexivity is a skill counsellors develop through counselling training and practice: “an ability to notice our responses to the world around us, other people and events, and

to use that knowledge to inform our actions, communications and understandings.” (Etherington 2004, 19) In terms of research, Etherington (2004, 31-32) defines reflexivity as “the capacity of the researcher to acknowledge how their own experiences and contexts inform the process and outcomes of inquiry.” In this section, I aim to provide a reflexive account of the positionality of this research.

As a narrative researcher, I believe that stories are told within social relationships, which implies that narrative expression cannot be constructed or understood outside the context of the narrator or the assumed listener (McAdams 2008a). Therefore, I do not pursue narrative or analytical convergence based on the presumption that a single universal truth exists (Josselson and Hammack 2021). Instead, I aim to continuously reflect on and engage with the contexts I bring as a researcher in the interview and analysing stages to inform my research practice. From an introspective perspective, I employ reflexivity to notice and reflect on my personal reactions to the narration during the interview and analysis process. Rather than removing my response to the participant or material I work with, I pay close attention to my response and engage with the possible underlying message conveyed through the process of narration. From an intersubjective perspective, I remain close to the interpersonal dynamics in the interview process and reflect on how interviews with different participants unfold, as well as the various ways narratives are constructed, which offers me insights into how participants make sense of their experiences from an interactive perspective. Moreover, because of my focus on relationships, the relational dynamic in the interview process also provides a complementary lens into the participants’ relationships. Apart from my own perspective, I also draw on my supervisors’ perspectives to help me in the reflexivity process. With their support, I do not focus on personal revelation but use reflexivity as “a springboard for interpretations and more general insight” (Finlay 2002, 215)

As a Chinese male in my early thirties, I am aware that my presence and role in this research have impact on this project. As one the main themes in this research, my Chineseness is explicitly relevant in different parts of this study, which includes the language and culture. I decide to use mandarin Chinese as my interview language because it is the language that most Chinese students use and study in their schools. I am aware that the use of language may trigger their memory of certain experiences

in China. It is helpful for me to elicit those lived experiences, but I also remain alerted for possible difficulties it may bring about for our interview. Due to the shared Chinese background, the understanding of Chinese culture is assumed in the interaction to some extent. Moreover, my northern accent can imply specific regional and cultural understanding. Hence, I stay aware when participant refer to something we know or we understand. I understand that as a way to avoid overexplaining and also probably a way to show some proximity in the intersubjective encounter in the context of the UK. Rather than ask for clarification bluntly, I choose to share what I think is shared and relevant to the issue they mention and check if they mean the same thing. Although this study is not about gender or age specifically, I think they are in play throughout this project. I constantly reflect on how I understand my gender and age in specific social and cultural context and how the value on those affects me. In the interview and analysis, I stay close to what I bring into the research from those characters of me. I also keep processing how my presence is perceived and understood through the co-creation of research materials. Last but not least, I also pay close attention to the intersectionality of different parts of my identities. To me, it means that I consider all my traits as a holistic entity and think about the combined effect of the different parts of me.

In the interview process, I intend to focus on the narrating process and notice the transferential interaction between the participants and me, which can be related to any previous relational experiences from my participants and me. Different parts of me can be perceived and understood through different lenses. In relation to the experience of boarding school, some may perceive me as their brothers, peers, while others may perceive me as their mother or teacher. Hence, I do not assume generalisations of what impact I can bring to the interviews. Instead, I pay close attention to the dynamic in the interviews to understand specific relationships with specific participants in different parts of narratives. Moreover, I am aware that it can take significant time for transferential relationships to be formed, processed and understood. Therefore, I remain close to the narrative and refrain from interpreting too much only based on the limited interactions in this project.

In the following section, I expand on my personal contexts as an ex-boarder and as a counsellor and how I reflect on and work with them. I have thirteen and a half

years of boarding experience across daycare centres, kindergartens, and schools in China, which has sparked my interest in and motivation to pursue this topic. I am aware that my personal, social, and contextual factors, including my boarding experience, can impact the research process at various stages, where I use my capacity to reflect on my participants' and my responses in research. In the interview process, my experiences of Chinese boarding schools, as an insider's knowledge, could help me understand my participants' settings and content. From a relational perspective, the similarities in experiences could bridge our individual and role differences, enabling a flowing narration process (Hollway and Jefferson 2000). On the other hand, I could potentially project my thoughts and feelings onto the narrating process, silencing or guiding my participants' accounts (Georgiadou 2014). To give space to my participants in interviews, I refrain from sharing my own experiences and endeavour to follow the participants' pace and flow during the interview process. Nonetheless, open and clarifying questions are needed to prevent me from assembling my understanding or assumptions on their narratives. When the urge to ask arises, I remain aware and reflect on the intention behind my questions to ensure that I stay on course during the research interview, acquiring elaboration and clarification from the participants.

As stated previously, I have developed reflexivity and adopted perspectives on interpersonal relationships through my counselling training and practice. I am aware that my identity as a counsellor also shapes this research. I can use counselling skills to create a safe environment and help participants express themselves (Finlay 2011). However, Finlay (2011) also warned about the risk of conducting counselling practice beyond the terms of research. In light of this, I position myself in line with the role of a researcher, engaging in constant reflection and setting clear boundaries between my role as a counsellor and my research, both to myself and to my participants in the interview. Additionally, I acknowledge my tendency to form impressions of people based on individualised perspectives, which is informed by my psychodynamic and person-centred backgrounds. I employ those theories in this thesis not for therapeutic or pathologising purposes, but as a means to form an understanding of each participant, which reflects the contexts in which they are situated.

Chapter 4 Method

4.1 Interview

4.1.1 Inclusion Criteria

Potential participants in the study were (1) aged eighteen or older and (2) had at least one year of experience studying in boarding school(s) in China between the ages of 6 and 16.

4.1.2 Exclusion Criteria

Those who did not wish to participate in the study, and those who did not meet the inclusion criteria. One participant was excluded because the boarding school they attended had an even number of boarders and non-boarders.

4.1.3 Research Location

I intended to recruit participants and conduct the interviews in China, but the research location was limited by ethical requirements and the time limits of a doctoral thesis. The university tightened the guidance on conducting data collection abroad, and China also implemented tighter scrutiny of data collected for foreign institutions. Although it is theoretically possible for me to obtain approval from schools and institutions, the uncertainty in the procedures and guidelines of newly introduced policies significantly increases the difficulty of completing my doctoral thesis within the required timeframe.

In the following section, I demonstrate a discussion about recruiting and interviewing in Edinburgh. Based on my methodological stance, narrative research views the experience as storied and contextual, emphasising the co-construction of meaning across time, space, and relationship (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). Edinburgh, as a location with its cultural context, enables reflection from a temporal, cultural and geographical distance. This distance can prompt the contrast between participants' past and present selves in different contexts, allowing the reflection on contexts like the Chinese relational, cultural and educational environment as well as the emergence of themes like independence, belonging and transformation, which are key aspects of the Chinese boarding school experience. However, this distance can

also lead to the process of recalling and narrating being biased or selective. The implication is that the narrative is deeply context-bound, which requires me as a researcher to be reflexive in the narration and analysis process and pay attention to the temporality, sociality, and place commonplaces in narrative research.

As most of my participants are international students, they refer to the differences and comparisons between the Chinese and British educational and cultural contexts. The transitional experiences between different environments could contribute to their reflection, acceptance or numbness of adapting to changes in their boarding and their current overseas experiences, which means different perspectives and meaning-making process being introduced to the interviewing process. As discussed in the last paragraph, interviewing in the UK brings up topics that they are currently facing, including separation from family, adaptation to local culture and individualised society. The impact of those, again, is dependent on the participants' specific contexts and situations, which are highly relevant to their life trajectories and relational pattern in their childhood. In practice, I think the interviews are benefited from the interview context of the UK as a distant cultural and geographical contrast to the participants' original Chinese contexts. Despite being used as a reference or comparison in interview to clarify their meanings, the UK context has limited impact on the interview process from my perception in the interview dynamic, which could be derived from the short period of time the participants spent in the UK.

Edinburgh has a substantial and diverse population of Chinese international students, allowing me to recruit participants from different regions in China. However, the participants in Edinburgh may present a relatively narrow demographic, especially regarding the socio-economic status in terms of families. In the end, the seven participants I recruited are from six different northern and southern provinces. The boarding schools they attended were located in villages, small towns and big cities.

4.1.4 Number of Participants

Based on the methodological foundations, I aimed to engage deeply with participants' narratives rather than arrive at generalisations of the Chinese boarding school experience. As the only researcher in my doctoral research, I allowed time for a 90-minute interview, the subsequent transcription and analysis for each participant.

Following the narrative methodology, I concentrate on the specific temporality, sociality, and place in each segment of narrative co-created in the interview (Clandinin 2022). In addition, I also adopt the relational lens to make sense of different aspects of participants' boarding experience. To reach a holistic understanding of each participant, this process requires time in narrating, listening, reflecting and examining both in and after the interview.

The data creation and analysis process means that I cannot reach generalisations of Chinese boarding school experiences. However, I do not abandon the diversity of different experiences in this project. I endeavour to cover the significant factors in the research field of Chinese boarding schools, including the region, gender and age differences, despite the reality of my research project, including the location and time frame limits. As I conduct interviews, I constantly stay aware of the saturation of my data sample, which means that I cease recruitment as I gain sufficient perspective in the current topic (Josselson and Hammack 2021). In the end, eight interviews were conducted. One participant was excluded because boarders were outnumbered by day students at their school. In this particular case, this participant and I discovered this during our interview. I discussed the possibility of not including their data and gave the voucher to them after the interview.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Name	Gender Identity	Age (Interview)	Boarding Years	Boarding Age	Region Type
Xiaofan	Female	28	3	15-18	Town
Anyang	Female	22	7	11-18	Village/Town
Yanqi	Female	28	6	12-18	Town
Hongying	Female	23	4	13-17	Town
Jieying	Female	26	6	12-18	City
Xiujie	Female	24	10	8-18	City
Junxian	Male	27	6	12-18	Town

4.1.5 Recruitment

Different recruitment methods were applied, including physical posters, online forums and group chats. Participants contacted me via email, and I sent them the Participant Information Sheet, which provided more details about this research. After agreeing on the interview, we set a date and time for the interview. I booked quiet university rooms based on the availability and participants' convenience.

4.1.6 Interview Process

Due to the different settings of university rooms, I arrived 5-10 minutes early to set up the room before the interview. I arranged two chairs facing each other as our seats and placed a desk on the side to hold tissues, a clock, a recorder, and the research forms.

Upon the participant's arrival, I would welcome them and introduce the research, the logistics of recording, and the meaning of consent. I would then give the participant enough time to read the Participant Information Sheet and the Consent Form and address their questions to their satisfaction.

After turning the recorder on, I would also verbally acknowledge the start of recording with the participant. I would start with questions about the participant's demographics and the context of their family and boarding school(s). Then, I would use open questions to elicit stories based on the themes of this research.

After the interview, I would give the participant a £10 voucher as a token of appreciation, turn off the recorder, review the Debriefing Sheet, reset the university room's settings, and leave the room with the participant before we parted.

4.2 Ethical Considerations

As a counsellor and researcher exploring childhood experiences through interviews, I am aware of the ethical concerns inherent in the research process. Therefore, I adopted the research ethical values, guidelines, and framework proposed by Kitchener (1984), Herlihy et al. (2015) and BACP (2018) in this project. I also worked with my supervisor and obtained ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Social Science at the University of Edinburgh. In the

following section, I present tailored procedures to address the specific concerns in my research with reflections.

4.2.1 Participant Vulnerability

Talking about childhood experiences can be emotionally charged, so I made plans to address potential risks of vulnerability during the interview process. Based on the non-maleficence principle in the BACP (2018) ethical framework, I did not probe on topics that participants found uncomfortable. I also checked with the participants when they showed signs of psychological stress or discomfort and acknowledged their feelings. As a researcher, I was also aware of the power dynamic in the interview, especially when participants felt vulnerable. Therefore, I ensured that they understood their freedom to withdraw from the study at any time during the interview, which demonstrated the importance of participants' autonomy within the ethical framework (BACP 2018). I also prepared a list of services in the Debriefing Sheet, which was given to the participant after the interview. These services encompass various types of mental health and emergency services in the UK and China.

One of my participants talked about their experience of receiving abusive words and behaviours from others in their childhood experiences. I discovered it gradually through an ongoing and accumulating narrative process, as the participant continued sharing their story in a calm and animated manner. I did not pause immediately but continued to offer acknowledgement and pay more attention to their status. As they went on to talk about specific scenes in detail, I paused to check their condition in the session as well as their situation in their current life. They said they were fine and also planned to recall and process those memories for personal reasons. They also had adequate support in their current situation. In the remainder of the interview, they were clear about where they found it difficult to recall or did not wish to elaborate further. At the end of the interview, we reviewed whether there were any aspects they did not want me to include in the research and revisited the confidentiality. After the research process, we also talked more about the services that could offer her help in the UK and China. I was clear that I could not offer counselling to them as it might cause dual relationships. I offered some professional opinions on the listed agencies and additional services I was aware of.

4.2.2 Confidentiality

I booked the rooms for interviews through the university system, which reduced the risk of double booking. The screen outside the room also showed that the meeting was in progress. As a result, no interviews were interrupted. I also ensured the recording system was off and placed the chairs away from the doors to prevent the leakage of interview content.

To ensure the confidentiality of data, I used the University of Edinburgh OneDrive because it is an encrypted online drive service protected by my password and additional authentication systems. The recorders I used in this research were all password-protected. After the interview, the recordings were uploaded to and only stored in the University of Edinburgh OneDrive. The recordings on the recorders were deleted. The transcription data was also only stored in the University of Edinburgh OneDrive.

Since the research focuses on Chinese boarding schools, this would be an existing disclosure to readers of this research piece. To reduce participants' identifiability, I used pseudonyms in all file names and narrative names. In my research, I ensured that I anonymised recognisable traits, such as the specific location and names of the schools, as well as the characteristics of other individuals in the narratives.

4.2.3 Validity

Grounded in the social constructionist and narrative stance, I work with the "narrative truth", which is situated within contexts and inherently "committed and partial" (Riessman 2008, 263). In other words, I am not trying to remove all personal interpretations and contexts to derive an accurate and factual record of my participants; instead, I engage with those personal understandings and situations in the narrative to inform my knowledge of Chinese boarding schools. Therefore, it is less important to pursue the actual facts valued by the realist ideas. Narrative, as a reflection of life, can be incoherent in terms of causality and continuity, despite the best efforts to make sense of experiences. The narrative about childhood can be fragmented, especially when traumatic events are involved. I believe it is my role in the interview to elicit coherent narratives and also to embrace incoherence as the narratives present

(Clandinin 2022). Incoherence, then, does not represent a lack of validity in a narrative study but rather presents another opportunity to explore the underlying meaning of the narrative.

In this research, I follow Riessman (2008)'s advocacy for the validity of the narrative method to elucidate clear processes of developing the research question, debate ontological, epistemological, and methodological ideas, document detailed processes of data collection and interpretation, adhere to detailed transcripts, pay attention to language, contexts of production and the convergence and divergence in experiences. Additionally, I am aware of the potential impact of my previous experience at Chinese boarding schools on this research. Therefore, I use reflexivity to constantly reflect on, differentiate, validate, and challenge my thoughts. The aim here is not to exclude my perspective, but to clearly articulate my stance and provide sufficient context for readers. Specifically, I have explicitly stated my assumptions in the analysis and discussion part of the thesis.

4.2.4 Researcher's Wellbeing

During the interviews, I was inevitably engaged in my participants' encounters and feelings. In all the stages of my research, I also constantly recalled my boarding school experiences. To mitigate the effects mentioned above, I paid attention to the feelings evoked at different stages and utilised my supervision and personal therapy to process my own feelings.

4.3 Processing Research Text

4.3.1 Transcription and Translation

For me, transcribing the interview was a process of revisiting and re-engaging with the experience. The university room, the time and weather on the day of interview, the atmosphere, and the dynamic all came alive to me, but this time, from a different perspective, where I abandoned my burden as an interviewer and focused on listening to the conversations, pondering the meaning, and wondering about the interactions between me and the participant. Therefore, this process familiarised me with the interview and also enabled my analytical sense.

I agree with Josselson and Hammack (2021, 52)'s statement that "most narrative research...is chiefly concerned with the larger meaning of the text and thus less interested in the microfeatures of the language itself." In relation to the topic of my research, the meaning of text is my main focus. However, I also took notes when the participants became emotional, laughing or crying, and when there were long pauses in the interview.

Without giving it too much thought, I translated the transcript of my first interview into English. As I re-read the transcription, I noticed that I had lost my sense of the interview. What I sensed, instead, was the process of translating: the texture of the desk in the study space, the word choices and grammatical structure that I wrestled with. I then started to realise what translation had cost me. Through conducting two pieces of narrative research, Y. Li (2011) also noticed that translating the Chinese transcriptions into English could create distance from the experience. Therefore, I have decided to work with the Chinese transcription and occasionally the original recording as materials for analysis. In sequence, this means that I transcribe the Chinese recording to Chinese transcription first. Then, I use the Chinese transcription to arrange the narrative (See Appendix 8 for an excerpt of coding the transcription). Finally, I conduct analysis, translate the narrative, and write it up in English (See Appendix 9 for an excerpt of translation and analysis).

As I used verbatim quotations to form narratives, I needed to translate them for my discussion in research supervision and the final presentation of my thesis. I am also aware of the rich contexts embedded in the use of the original language (Gawlewicz 2016). When translating the interviews, I made choices by carefully weighing the balance between the readability of the English translation and the originality of the Chinese text. Due to the intrinsic differences between the two languages, some degree of loss in translation is inevitable.

4.3.2 Analysis Approach

As Freeman (2007, 6) argues, "narrative accounts of emotionally important relationships promise to expand psychology's lexicon and understanding of the ways in which relationship to others structures, sustains, and transforms a life. Studying people's narrations about significant aspects of their relational life allows us to assess

proportion and depth and meaning of relationship in a life. In such approaches, we can go beyond trying to name or classify or evaluate; we can aim to investigate process and construction of relational experience in the context of the experience of self.” Based on the importance of interpersonal relationships in the research field of Chinese boarding school experiences and my methodological considerations, I implemented the relationship lens as the initial idiographic division of the narrative when processing data. For each participant, I categorised the narratives under the themes of family relationships, peer relationships and relationships with staff.

My analytical approach was informed by the narrative portraiture proposed by Rodríguez-Dorans (2023), which advocates the individual, detailed narrative of the narrator in an idiographic manner. In relation to my research topics, the method of narrative portraiture suits my research topics in three specific ways. Firstly, portraiture illustrated the relational life of a narrator as a whole. This feature of narrative portraits concerns the totality of experience, rather than fragmented and discursive stories. I do not mean that this method is a way to access the full experience, but rather a stance of viewing the narrative I collected as a whole, which offers a comprehensive account of the boarder’s life within its cultural, social and historical contexts. Secondly, the portraits of one participant enable the examination and comparison of different relationships for them. The convergence and divergence, in turn, can reflect their perception and adaptation to the boarding school environment. Lastly, the portraits demonstrate a developmental trajectory of the boarders’ lives, which could be a means of investigating the maturation process in the adolescent stage.

Grounded in my narrative epistemological stance, I intended to present the findings in the form of narrative and analysis, in which I co-constructed the knowledge with my participants from different perspectives. In the narratives, I positioned myself on the side of the participant’s role of a storyteller, which means we co-construct the narration. In this process, I aimed to keep the participants’ narratives mostly uninterpreted with verbatim quotations. My analytical role here is to examine and code the narratives with the temporality, sociality, and place commonplaces in narrative research (Clandinin 2022) and to arrange them into narrative portraits in different relationships (Rodríguez-Dorans and Jacobs 2020). In the analysis, I sided with the participant’s role of interpreting and evaluating their story, which means we co-

construct the analysis. In this process, I led the analysis process by identifying the significant markers in the narrative proposed by Josselson and Hammack (2021): primacy, frequency, incompleteness, uniqueness, negation, omission, emphasis and contradictions. Meanwhile, I also drew on the participant's interpretation and evaluation, as well as our discussions during the interview, to form the analysis.

In conducting this analysis, I am also aware of my interpretive power as a researcher. My decisions about what to include, emphasise, or connect across the narratives inevitably shape the meanings that are presented in this thesis. Recognising this, I sought to mitigate the asymmetry of power by offering narrative space to my participants. This is not merely a methodological choice, but an ethical commitment to honour their voices and experiences. By foregrounding their narratives and interpretations, rather than reducing them to abstract theoretical categories, I aim to share epistemic authority and affirm their capacity as knowledge holders and narrators. In doing so, I position the research process as a dialogical and relational act, where knowledge is co-constructed rather than extracted.

Chapter 5 Findings

In this chapter, I explore my two research questions: *How do boarders in China make sense of their boarding school experiences?* and *How do boarders relate to others within the setting of Chinese boarding schools?* I address these questions by presenting narrative portraits of seven participants, focusing on how they construct meaning through their lived experiences and relationships embedded in their contexts. These portraits are accompanied by analysis shaped by both their perspectives and my own. The analysis reflects not only our individual subjectivities but also the intersubjective dynamics that emerged in our conversations. While this thesis foregrounds the interpretation of these narratives grounded in my methodological choices, the richness and complexity of these narratives allow for alternative readings of Chinese boarding school experiences.

5.1 Xiaofan: From Only to One of Many

Peer Relational Portraits

“Normal” Relationships at School

The reason for choosing a boarding school was straightforward for Xiaofan: *“On the one hand, that school is quite a good school. On the other hand, boarding schools are very common in my region. I was choosing among three to four good schools, and they were all boarding schools, so it was not necessarily a choice to go to a boarding school.”*

“The boarding school I attended is very far from the city centre. I needed to cross a channel, either by ferry or by car across a bridge. It was so troublesome as it took 1 hour to 40 minutes one way... Our school is also halfway up a hill. It took more than ten minutes to walk to the school from the ferry stop... Boarding was obviously an advantageous choice. Suspension from boarding was a punishment at that time. There were many rules in the boarding school. If you broke the rules, you would get points deducted. Reaching a certain number of points meant the suspension of

boarding. Then, you would have to come to school and go back home every day for a week.”

“I felt happy when I left boarding school for home, but I did not feel unhappy on my way to the boarding school. After all, all my friends and classmates were at the school...I had one close friend in the same class as me for three years. The other friend was my deskmate in the first grade, and we were in different classes afterwards...We chatted about many different things, including studying, a necessary topic as the main part of my life in boarding school. Things like how the exam was, and the difficult questions that we couldn’t solve. We also had common hobbies like novels, comics and songs. Sometimes, we also shared food we brought from home.”

Spending 5.5-6 days a week at school, Xiaofan had more time with peers at school: *“We lived together. We went to breakfast, lunch and dinner together. We also waited for each other to do things together. For example, decisions like taking showers during lunch breaks or evenings or having meals earlier or later today. There would be more bumping into one another and compromises...but nothing dramatic, just a very simple and very normal life. The biggest compromise I had to make was showering. Because there were only two showers in my dormitory room (for 6-8 students), if they were occupied during the lunch break, I would need to plan my shower time again. It was a bit annoying, but there was not much I could do.”*

Analysis

Xiaofan’s narrative was about her everyday life at boarding school. As she said, *“nothing dramatic, a very simple and very normal life”*, indicating the mundane, familiar, repetitive nature of her experience in the boarding school. Lefebvre (2014, 129) argues that *“the shift from ‘significant’ facts to the sum total of everyday events corresponds exactly to the shift from appearance to reality – an operation which is as important for science as is the shift from individual elements to the totality.”* As stated in the methodology chapters, I pursue the totality of experience rather than only the partial and attractive cases. The everyday life also enables the investigation of existing and taken-for-granted contexts. Notably, the conversation happened with me as the audience. Therefore, the normality could also represent the shared contexts Xiaofan and I were in, namely the Chinese social, cultural, and historical contexts.

For Xiaofan, a senior high school meant a boarding school in her region at that time, so she did not perceive boarding school as an abnormal type of school. The location of the boarding school also made it inconvenient to go home every day. Boarding meant more time in bed and less hassle for parents. In Xiaofan's context, the choice of going home was always possible, but the advantage of boarding was obvious and practical for the students. This context differed from the Western context in the past, where boarders were told they had to attend niche, privileged boarding schools and had no choice of going home (Laughton, Paech-Ujejski, and Patterson 2021). In addition, her school's introduction of the point system and the punishment of suspending boarding connected the boarders' good behaviour to the convenience of boarding.

Under those rules, the boarders understood that they actively earned their chances of boarding by behaving well in the boarding school, which implied that boarding was the norm in the peer group. Surrounded by peers with the same narrative, Xiaofan felt "*normal*" in her boarding school. I believe the normality in Xiaofan's narrative reflects the pursuit of efficiency, which could be taken for granted in the local context in this region. Boarders study, eat, sleep, play and socialise in the boarding school 5.5-6 days a week. It is efficient, so "*boarding was obviously an advantageous choice*" for Xiaofan and her peers. All the components of their adolescent activities are included on campus, with regulations to ensure they were safe and well-behaved. From the parents' perspective, boarding schools also freed parents from some of their parental responsibilities. In Xiaofan's region, such conveniences gradually made boarding the default option for many families, contributing to the sense that it was not really a choice but a norm.

The environment change from family to school did not bother Xiaofan too much. She was happy to see her friends every Sunday evening. The friendships she made in school provided her with the company and support she needed. The friendships in day school are limited to daytime activities and mostly in the classroom or playground. The interaction between Xiaofan and her peers in the boarding school extended to the dormitories and canteens. In the context of the only-child policy in China, parents have become more child-centred, and children have become "little emperors" at home (L. Li et al. 2020, 1). Specifically, the child becomes increasingly valuable due to the

allowance to have only one child. In a typical Chinese family, two parents and four grandparents devote time and material resources to the only child. As a result, the only children were often seen as spoiled, with no one to share resources or attention with (Deutsch 2006). Xiaofan and most of her peers were only children who had neither company with siblings nor experience with sharing spaces or resources at home. When the only children lived together in a small dormitory, they spent more time with peers in limited spaces, so arrangements and compromises had to be made inevitably. With the frequent and close contact with peers prompted by the boarding school environment, boarders realised they are not the centre of the world. For Xiaofan, *“It was a process of probing boundaries with one another... This stage (in boarding school) was when my socialisation progressed faster.”*

Cohesive Sense of Unity

“There were many different activities and events like volleyball games, basketball games and other matches among classes. We also had a creation festival, which entailed a class-based choral competition and activities of different themes held in the classroom by each class. Many alumni and parents would attend the festival on campus. All those activities were organised in the unit of the class.”

“I don’t know about other schools. Relationships with senior and junior students were also important in our lives at the boarding school because we often met them in clubs and societies... We formed relationships through connections in societies. When they played games in class matches, we cheered them up as junior students from the society. Before the university entrance exam every year, the first and second-grade students would cheer for the examinees in the third grade. In the third grade, we also received cheering from junior students before the exam.”

“In every class, there would be several students. From my perspective now, they had their individuality and did not want to hide or cover it. At that time, we thought they were weird. There was no bullying in my classes, but those people did not have close peers. They did everything alone.”

Analysis

In the Chinese context, most schools tended to divide students into fixed classes for lessons and activities to cultivate class unity, a form of organisational spirit that unites all the members to achieve the educational goal at school (S. Zhou 2011). In Xiaofan's experience, the formation of the unity of her class was strengthened by various activities and events held within the relatively closed boarding school environment. The environment was built and maintained by the staff, students, families and even alumni in Xiaofan's school. As a participant in those activities and a member who identified with the unity school culture, Xiaofan blended into her peer group and found her sense of belonging within it. In her narration, Xiaofan often used "we" rather than "I". Her memories at the boarding school seemed primarily stored and expressed from the perspective of unity, representing the class or the school. All the happiness and sadness, then, were shared through the unity of the class and school. Due to the residency in the boarding school, the collective group's effect was amplified. As an individual within the collective group, although Xiaofan's individuality was downplayed, she engaged well with the group and felt content with the sense of unity. However, the students who did not want to comply with the collective groups could be isolated more in the boarding school.

In the interview with Xiaofan, I also felt a sense of acceptance. They weaved the narrative about boarding schools with the routines, rules and the collective. The lack of specific events and individual or emotional response was evident in our interview, especially in the school part of the narrative. I feel that I was talking to a group in a general manner, which reminds me that all those routines, rules and the collective are given to the students. Having accepted and adopted those, Xiaofan, in this sense, faded behind the group and into normality comfortably.

Through Xiaofan's narrative, blending in with and belonging to the collective group seems to be the default and normal for most boarders in her class. I think those settings of the boarding school acknowledge and enact the interdependence in Chinese culture, emphasising the reliance on one another (Shi 2013). For example, Xiaofan and her peers in different grades supported each other in the social network, which was enabled by the settings of activities and living conditions in the boarding school. In this process, Xiaofan and her peers formed close relationships. Normality

implies the social norm and collective value of interdependence, which is passed down through generations and widely celebrated in the Chinese social context. Through this narrative, the path of passing down is also evident at school, from students in higher grades to those in lower grades, facilitated by the established tradition of cheering up.

Teacher Relational Portraits

Care and Cultivation

“The headteacher in our class kept changing every year, but they were all very good to us. They cared about us. Maybe our headteachers, my headteachers, were all young, so they would concentrate more on their careers in this school. They worked at school for very long hours (6:30-22:00). They would sleep in the teachers’ apartment on campus. Most of the time, they could be found in their office...Knowing they were there was quite important for a student like me. The headteachers definitely cared about our marks, not only the subject they taught. They also encouraged us to participate in different societies and exercises. They also discouraged or banned us from studying during physical education class or the scheduled sleeping time.”

“We had two evening self-study sessions every day. Our teachers would not be present for the second one, but there was a quiet atmosphere. The teacher could be around...It was a collective atmosphere. I needed to be quiet during this period of time, and I needed to study. All my peers were diligent. This created a quiet atmosphere, so I was also able to focus on study. If I were at home, I might play around here and there. My mom could come in with some fruits and chat with me. The time just slipped away easily.”

Analysis

The headteachers often play several roles in schools, including teaching, supervising, organising, coordinating, and caring (Gu, Ma, and Teng 2017). With the absence of parents on weekday evenings, the headteachers carried more responsibilities for the students. Despite the changes in headteachers, Xiaofan

received care from all three of them. She experienced them as young and enthusiastic, which could bring closer relationships between teachers and students. Teachers in this isolated boarding school lived on the same campus as the students and had similar schedules. Therefore, the teachers did not abandon the students after work but positioned themselves in unity with all the students at school. In this way, the unity was strengthened by the demonstration of those teachers.

Knowing the teachers were there also made Xiaofan feel secure in the boarding school. She knew she *“could find the teachers either in their offices or the apartments... in case of sickness on campus.”* The accessibility gradually turned into an internal presence in Xiaofan’s mind. She did not need to see the teachers to feel safe and held by them. Moreover, this presence also promoted discipline in the classroom. Students in Xiaofan’s class did not need to see their headteacher to stay focused on their studies, resulting in a culture of quiet study during the evening sessions. From a relational perspective, the headteachers gave the students in their classes more autonomy in their daily lives and studies, rather than enforcing the traditional, highly authoritative teaching interactions prevalent in Chinese culture (Gu, Ma, and Teng 2017).

Family Relational Portraits

Readiness through Family

After the decision to attend a boarding school, Xiaofan did feel *“nervous and afraid”*. *“Because I did not know what that was like. I needed to live with and build relationships with others. It was only my family at home before boarding school. There would be others in the dormitory. I wouldn’t know how they were. I think it was good that we had a canteen, so I would not need to cook. Apart from showering and washing clothes, there was not much request for living skills. So, the main concern was about the peers in the same dormitory room. It was a mixture of attending boarding school and entering the stage of senior high school.”*

“My parents knew some friends whose children also attended boarding school. My cousins were also in the same school before. Although they left that school when I entered, they had experience staying there. My parents took me to talk about the

experience of boarding school with them, including what I needed to look out for there, so that I was prepared, psychologically...I am not sure if it was common, but my friends in my hometown and I were close with the paternal and maternal grandparents and the external family members. There are six of them in my mom's generation. After my maternal grandma passed away, we met at my grandpa's every week because he lived alone. That was a very lively day of the week. I always joined them over the weekend or during vacations. I saw many cousins there."

Analysis

Xiaofan also felt nervous before she went to boarding school, mainly because of the relationships she might encounter. She received comfort and reassurance from students who had similar experiences through her parents. Instead of patronising or reasoning, her parents offered her chances to talk to peers and connect with ex-boarders' experiences. Xiaofan and her parents gained practical knowledge about the boarding school setting. More importantly, in the process, Xiaofan could get a sense of the lived experience of boarding school and how she might interact with her peers by talking to ex-boarders who could be like her potential peers. In this way, she was told and shown that she would be fine with her peers in the boarding school.

The environment change from an only-child family to a boarding school could be difficult for Xiaofan, but she had the experience of mingling with her cousins weekly in her extended family, just like many Chinese children from only-child families (Eberstadt and Verdery 2023). Xiaofan *"joined"* and enjoyed the *"lively"* day when she was with her extended family members, including her cousins. Although the relationships with her cousins in her generation were not the same as those of her peers in the boarding school, her weekly interactions with peers of similar ages at home enriched her experience with peers. As a result, she felt comfortable with her peers at her boarding school.

Love in the Routines

"I remember the journey back quite well. The ferry schedule was fixed. Usually, the time was just right for the end of the last class on Saturday morning. With no delay in the teacher's class, readily packed luggage, and a bit of running to the dock, one could

catch the ferry just right. Otherwise, there would be a 20-minute wait. When the bell for the end of class rang, we would pack the book into our backpacks, pick up the luggage lined up outside the classroom and start dashing. Haha, to catch the first ferry...The food at boarding school was not fresh or nutritious enough, so my parents would buy fresh ingredients and cook for me to welcome me home.”

“I needed to pack the clothing for a whole week, and all the snacks. They had to be packed all in one go. This was the only chance to take things from home, so packing was important. I was thinking a lot about what to pack. My parents also enjoined me on what I should or should not pack...The journey back to school was very rushed, so I couldn’t have dinner at home. I had to eat in my mom’s car.”

“We got back to the dormitory around 10 to 10:30 after the evening self-study, so probably just one or two sentences. Because all of us would give a call home every day just to say that we were good at school, everyone would need to call, so just a few sentences for each one of us...Basically, there was limited time for talking. There was not a lot to share about life in senior high school. It was just simple daily life. Also, I could not share something like disagreements with classmates. I would have to wait until I was home.”

Analysis

Xiaofan had several minutes of phone calls with her parents on weekdays and saw them on weekends. Although the boarding school setting limited the amount of time Xiaofan could spend with her parents, She received care from them in various ways. The welcoming meal made her feel at home. After having standardised meals for a week at school, the fresh, nutritious, and homemade meals just for her reminded Xiaofan that she was a unique and precious daughter of her parents. The preparation and journey back to school showed her parents’ physical support for her. The unmissable chance to bring things from home to school was precious. In the context of a boarding school, the administrator observed that the consumption of food brought from home could trigger students’ emotions within the peer group, representing their connections with family (Kelsang 2019). For Xiaofan, the materials at home were either better than or different from those at school. The packed bags that held the connections with her parents were carried to the boarding school every week. There

were also topics that could only be discussed with parents, such as disagreements with classmates.

Xiaofan's narrative about her parents felt a bit constrained to me. The setting of boarding school limited the time of Xiaofan's interactions with her parents in person and over the phone. The journey back to the boarding school was also rushed, with meals sometimes eaten in the car. This could be interpreted as "emotional absence", representing the "inability to deal with anything emotional" because of the impact of boarding (Duffell and Basset 2016, 60). I think that it was an adaptation rather than a loss of emotion. In her narrative, Xiaofan was not sentimental about the separation. However, the expression of emotion is underlying in the narrative. The excitement of catching the ferry, the cherishing of the chance to pack and the consistency of calling home. Those normal, repetitive weekly routines showed the embedded traces of love and attachment. Xiaofan was attached to her parents and felt secure enough to separate from them and form other relationships when needed. When asked about her feelings of change from a day school to a boarding school, Xiaofan said: *"I did not feel much different. I felt freer in senior high school (boarding school). I was not living alone, but I was away from my parents. It was a few days, and I could still see my parents at home over the weekend. I felt I had more space than I did in elementary and junior high school."*

Summary

Through the narrative portraits, Xiaofan engaged well with the boarding school environment. Transitioning from a day school in junior high to a boarding school in senior high was smooth for her, with family support, and her recognition of the unity of the class and school facilitated by the boarding school setting and the relational support provided by peers and teachers. Drawing on the notion of interdependency in Chinese culture, the boarding school environment not only fostered a sense of belonging in Xiaofan but also guided students into transition from an only-child family environment to a social context centred on sharing and cohabiting with others. Facing the changes in contact with family, Xiaofan was also capable of establishing new connections at school to balance the reduced time at home. In her new stage of

development, the negotiation of relationships and self went well, and she enjoyed both the family and school environments.

5.2 Anyang: Claiming Voice and Visibility

Family Relational Portraits

Limited and Changing Access to Parents

Anyang attended a day school for the first five years of primary school. *“I think I am a left-behind child in some sense. Because my parents went to work in other cities when I was young. I lived in my grandma’s place with my brother and three cousins from my aunts’ families. I did not feel anything about that. That was because I went there when I was five. My grandma needed to take care of so many children, so I had to take care of myself. I usually did not see my parents, maybe once or twice a year. That was the case for my first three years in primary school. They would return during the Chinese New Year and perhaps in the summer. My mom stopped working in other cities and came back to my hometown when I was in the fourth grade. She still asked me to live at my grandma’s because of the distance from school. It (her grandma’s place) was like a boarding school, and my mom picked me up on Fridays. Later, two boys who lived close to my home transferred to my school. My mom bought me a bike so I could cycle home with them daily.”*

“My father was rarely home because he was busy with work. He showed up at home randomly, and I wouldn’t know until I saw him... There was one time I remembered very clearly. I took the bus as usual and found him waiting at the entrance of our village. I was very confused until I saw his car: he drove to pick me up... He was not busy when I was in senior high school, and I could see him whenever I was home.”

“I started my boarding school at the beginning of my sixth grade of primary school. After that, I went to junior and senior high school in a very strict school in town. I went home once a week during my junior high school, once every fortnight in the first and second grade in my senior high school and once a month in the final year of senior high school.”

	non Left-behind				Left-behind				Left-behind with one parent						non Left-behind				
School type	Before school						Primary (day)					Primary (boarding)	Junior High (boarding)			Senior High (boarding)			
Age	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	
Week days	Mother and Father				Grandmother				Grand mother	Mother		School							
Week ends	Mother and Father				Grandmother				Mother	Mother						Mother and Father/School			

Table 2: Anyang’s Childhood Status

[This table was made based on Anyang’s narrative, demonstrating her left-behind status (first row), school type (second row), weekday company (fourth row) and weekend company (fifth row) across different ages (third row).]

Analysis

Anyang’s narrative demonstrates the life arrangements of left-behind children who have been left by their parent(s) to work in other regions. Because of rural unemployment, poverty, urban economic development, etc., migrant workers from rural regions tend to work in urban areas. In Anyang’s case, her parent(s) went to work in different cities while she lived with her grandmother and other cousins. As of 2020, the number of left-behind children reached 66.93 million (ages 0-17), accounting for 22.48% of children across China (National Bureau of Statistics of China, UNICEF China, and UNFPA China 2023). Significant research has been conducted in this field, with mixed results. However, two pieces of meta-analysis suggested that left-behind children were disadvantaged in their development compared to non-left-behind children (Chen et al. 2020; C. Zhou, Sylvia, et al. 2015).

Moreover, Anyang began attending boarding schools at the age of 11 and continued until she graduated from senior high school. Because she spent more nights at boarding schools, her access to family members was reduced. To understand the context of Anyang’s narrative about boarding schools, please refer to the timeline illustrating Anyang’s accessibility to her family members. It is also noticeable that family relationships and interactions are complicated and nuanced. The number of family members or duration of interactions with family cannot represent Anyang’s experience. As Cavenagh, McPherson, and Ogden (2024) argue based on interviews with ex-boarders, early relationships could already be impaired prior to attending

boarding schools. In Anyang's case, the parental separation was salient before she attended boarding school. She described her grandma's place as similar to the boarding school setting after her mother returned to the village, as she could only see her on the weekends. In rural regions of China, many students who were left behind also attended boarding schools due to the significant gap between urban and rural areas and the policy of consolidating schools, which resulted from the reduced number of students (Yan Zhu 2019). However, the arrangements of children in rural regions are also different. Anyang had different left-behind experiences before attending boarding schools. Therefore, her narrative about boarding school was embedded in the changing condition of her family relationships, which is a crucial element in understanding her narrative of relationships in boarding schools.

In Anyang's narrative, she experienced parental separation from age 5. She could only see her parents once or twice a year. The separation continued with constant changes in her caretakers, which were decided unilaterally by her parents. With the limited care and constant changes, she said she *"did not feel anything"* and *"had to take care of herself"*. I think Anyang suggested that she had adapted to the absence of her parents because they left her with her grandma from the age of 5. In this process, she adjusted to the only yet busy caregiver: her grandma. Her dad's random and rare visit surprised Anyang, for which she was not notified or prepared. Anyang expressed a mixture of happiness and gentle blaming as she commented on the scene with laughter: *"I really could not comprehend why he waited at the gate of the village with his car."* At this stage, Anyang was obedient in her relationship with family members. Her parents decided when and where to meet her. Although she would like to spend more time with her parents, it was difficult or forbidden for her to voice her needs, as she depended on them.

Tentative Protest to the Continued Absence

"In retrospect, there was no sixth grade in the primary school in my village. I could only go to the town for a sixth year. It was far away from home, and I had no family in town, so I had to attend a boarding school. On the other hand, my father thought the quality of education in the village was low. He wanted me to go to high schools in town with higher enrollment standards. Attending a better school in town for the sixth year of

primary school would make up for the poor education in my village. There's another reason: I had a younger cousin from my third aunt's family. He was also in that school. We were transferring together to the same school."

"My cousins, friends and teachers were staying at the same school to continue high school there. My father thought another school was better and forced me to take the exam there. I didn't want to transfer, so I didn't finish my math test. But I still reached the cut-off point. It was a private school, so we had to pay 5000 yuan per year. My father insisted on sending me there."

"I did not want to go to school, and I did not want to leave home." In primary school, there was a school bus for her journeys between school and home. "I started to take public buses in junior high school. I felt lonely, especially since I did not have a phone. The first bus was from my village to the town, and then another bus from the bus station to school. My school was far from the bus stop. It took me two hours one way. I was contemplating a lot on the bus journey by myself. It felt like all the bad things happened all at once. I had to go home alone. My father was rarely home, so he could not drive me. My mother also had a medical operation. She had no time to take care of me. Plus, our house in the village was also being renovated...I was very shy and did not have many friends in first grade. When I got first place on the exam, it was very sudden for my classmates. Nobody knew me."

Analysis

The initial reason for attending boarding school was reasonable for Anyang. With her experience of separation from her parents, she did not feel disturbed much by boarding school. However, Anyang's transfer to another school was disastrous for her. Before the transfer, she was already upset about the potential loss of her connections at boarding school. Although it was just one year, she saw peers and teachers every weekday. She valued and cherished the relationships she had there, which were especially important for boarding school students, given the separation from their families. However, the decision was forced on her by her father, who was mostly physically and emotionally absent. Anyang's father wanted her to go to a better school. From a relational perspective, her father rarely met her and enforced her separation from peers and teachers. Children with absent fathers could "search

anxiously and in vain for connection” (Schwartz 2021, 4). When Anyang did find connections through her boarding school, the connections were taken away from her. Compared to other peers who stayed in the same school with familiar teachers and peers, Anyang had to build relationships with new peers from scratch in a new environment. As for the father-child relationship, Anyang’s absent father had already left her a “gaping hole where father love should be.” (Schwartz 2021, 6) Meanwhile, she was receiving instruction on life decisions from this “hole”. Instead of falling into a spiral of self-blame and confusion, Anyang chose to rebel silently. Although she ultimately failed, this marked the beginning of her protest against family separation.

After the transfer, loneliness became the predominant theme of her first year at school. At school, Anyang was still in the process of building relationships with her peers. She always had company at her first boarding school and on the journey to and from home. Many boarders are rarely alone as they are surrounded by peers at school and parents at home. Therefore, loneliness was unbearable for many boarders, which might be alleviated by supporting positive family and peer relationships (Cavenagh, McPherson, and Ogden 2024). Unfortunately, she had neither. The loss of her peers, the absence of her father, the unavailability of her mother, and the renovation work at home all crammed into Anyang’s life at once. She felt extremely lonely, especially on her journey between school and home, which confirmed her foresight and justified her rebellion. The consequences she received seemed to suggest that she did not fight hard enough and that she should protest explicitly and fiercely, which was suppressed by limited contact with family due to the boarding school setting and her family’s unavailability. She had no choice but to hold her feelings for her family to herself.

Longing and Asserting Connection

“I think it was a new semester when I was in junior high school, and the bed needed to be made when the semester started. I was on the top bunk, and I insisted my mom do it for me. I don’t know why; emotions suddenly came to me. I think I realised that she would go after making the bed and leave me here to study. She talked to me while making my bed, but I didn’t respond much. My mom said, ‘(You acted) like I owe you!’ I was very angry. Then, she went home, and I went to the classroom.”

Anyang and her family moved to the town when she was in senior high school, and her father also came home. Under the setting of her boarding school, she went home once a fortnight or a month. *"I was very stubborn. I don't know why, maybe because it was not good to go by myself when I was a kid. It's not a good feeling. Since we moved, I asked that they had to send me to school. My mom said I could take the bus, but I said no. I insisted on being sent to school by my family. I remembered once very clearly: It was raining, and I still asked them to send me. But my parents were not home. My brother asked me if I had to be sent by him. I said I had to. So my brother rode an electric bike in a raincoat and dropped me off at school."*

"When my father sent me to school, we didn't talk. He drove while I sat in the back. Actually, he often sent me to school (after they moved). There was one time he sent me in the winter, and I brought one extra quilt. He dropped me off at the school entrance, but the dormitory building was quite far away. I carried the quilt alone all the way. Then I complained to my mom about it, and my mom scolded him. After that, my father carried most of the clothes, and I carried a few. He always sent me upstairs to my room because my mom would scold him otherwise."

Analysis

As Anyang continued in her boarding school after the first lonely year, her separation from her family became unbearable. Across the three scenarios, she did not passively suffer from the separation. Anyang knew she needed affection and time with her family. When her family became available, she did not waste any chance to let her parents know. The rational part of her *"felt guilty for asking to be sent in the rain because I could have called a cab."* However, she insisted and wanted to *"stay together a bit more with them."* Instead of passive dissociation or bereavement from her parents after the separation (Schaverien 2015), Anyang was actively demanding the affection she needed. In her interactions with family members, she assessed whether they could help or stay longer with her. Then, she also asked for it directly and firmly. She also utilised the family dynamics to get help indirectly. These processes require mental capacity and courage, which might be difficult for younger boarders to accomplish. However, Anyang's narrative illustrated a boarding school child's active role in her relationship with her family, even in the limited time she had

with them. When Anyang needed more affection but could not get it due to time constraints, she would still let her family know. The boarding school environment did not inhibit her expression of feelings in family relationships. It is also important to draw the difference between Anyang's behaviours and the typical survival personality of the "Rebel" mentioned by Duffell and Basset (2016). Although Anyang was not happy about the separation, her rebellion did not accord with "to excessively blame boarding school, parents and all authorities in general for all the problems in their life." (Duffell and Basset 2016, 54) Instead, I think she made her request clear without overblaming others or the environment.

Anyang's narrative also reveals how meaning was actively made during the interview itself. Initially unsure why she had insisted on seemingly "irrational" behaviours (e.g. being sent to school in the rain), she began to cry while recounting the story. Through narration, she was not only remembering but also making sense of her past actions and feelings. As McAdams (2008b, 244) noted, "stories often bring together into an understandable frame disparate ideas, characters, happenings and other elements of life that were previously apart." In the process of constructing her narrative, Anyang began to integrate irrational, stubborn and protesting parts of herself. This meaning-making was not just retrospective but relational. As Freeman (2007) argues, to understand a human person, we need to understand their relation to all that is not themselves. The relational focus of the interview provided a frame through which Anyang could narrate her boarding school experience not merely as a personal struggle, but as a dynamic negotiation of closeness and distance with her family. Without this reflective space, her insisting, complaining, or refusing might be misread as disobedience or emotional immaturity. Instead, they emerge as expressions of emotional clarity and relational agency, revealing how young boarders find ways to assert connection in constrained settings.

From Complying to Claiming Visibility

"I think boarding schools did have an impact on me. I basically needed to take care of myself. My time at home was limited. I had fewer conflicts with my parents, and they didn't know who I was...I gradually started to have some resistance. It's like I had complied with a regular pattern of living for a very long time, and I did not want to

comply with it anymore. Actually, I often wanted to draw my family's attention. Since my brother had a baby boy, my family paid much attention to him. I started to draw their attention by doing whatever I wanted and exposing all my flaws. It seemed that my life was regular for so long that I should be one who followed the rules, but I was not. I felt distant from my parents when I was in high school. My parents rarely came to my school, but my classmates' parents sometimes took them out of school for a relaxing bath. My parents were very obedient to the rules. When I had a leg injury, it would be better if I could rest at home for half a day. He (her father) just took me out for the cast. He picked me up during the fifth class in the morning and took me to lunch. Then I had the cast on my leg, and he sent me back during the lunch nap break. There was no rest. Although I went home every day because I could not sleep in the upper bunk bed, I felt I was a bit like. How do I say it, like a burden? They just left me there." "I rarely argued with my parents before we were together when I was in senior high school. We were distant, and I felt it was difficult to raise anything. We got closer after moving into town. I also got a phone at that time. My brother created a group chat where he shared some videos of my nephew. I checked it and replied to them every day. We mainly argued about the parenting and education of my nephew. I sometimes told my family members that they shouldn't educate him in the wrong way... As for me, I argued about studying abroad. Maybe not arguments, more like confrontations between me and my dad. I wanted to study abroad, but he was back and forth on this issue. Sometimes he agreed and sometimes disagreed because of his concern about the pandemic."

Analysis

The boarding school environment had a salient impact on Anyang. She was very lonely and felt abandoned by her family. Due to the limited contact time, her parents *"did not know who I (she) was"*. This process of masking and pretending was commonly adopted by boarders to cope with the separation and the boarding school environment (Duffell and Basset 2016). Besides, she was tired of conforming to different rules in boarding schools. Boarders referred to the boarding school as a prison because of the institutionalised captivity, including the rules, schedules, obedience to others, distance from home, etc.(Schaverien 2015) Anyang also felt

constrained by this environment. Worse, she could not express her feelings at the beginning.

From senior high school, Anyang gradually started to request and ask for more time with her family, despite continuing her time in boarding school, which later extended to her life decisions and care for other family members. Her relationship with her family was more congruent and straightforward. Based on her narrative about family relationships, I believe that both Anyang and her family facilitated this transition through their interactions. From Anyang's side, due to maturity and socialisation, the parent-child relationship becomes more mutual as the child ages, which helps to redefine the relationship (Weiner et al. 2012). She was able to state her request directly to her family. Her family also became more accessible to her as her father returned home, and they relocated from the village to the town. The role of the Internet connection is worth noticing, as it offers a convenient platform for family interactions. From Anyang's narrative, I would argue that the impact of boarding school could be alleviated in the family relationship. Instead of passively waiting for "rescue", the boarder plays an active role with their family in the process of alleviating this impact.

Teacher Relational Portraits

The Teacher Feels Like a Sister

"In the primary boarding school, our headteacher had her desk in the back of our classroom. That was her office. She would sit there and work when we were having lessons. She felt like our sister because she was young. She had just graduated. At the last self-study session in the morning, she sometimes took one of us out of the school to run some errands. She signed her name and informed the guard. Then she took me out. I could follow her to do something or to her home. She would randomly pick one of the six girls. I don't really know why she would take us, maybe just to make us happy. She took me, and I waited for her, and then we went back to school. For me, it was fun to walk around and have some delicious food and snacks occasionally."

Analysis

All the students in Anyang's class were transferred from other schools. Like Anyang, many of them attended boarding school for the first time. Anyang could not understand why the young teacher had taken them off campus, but she did remember her happiness. Apart from the happiness mentioned by Anyang, I could sense the intimacy when the teacher invited her home and the trust when she asked her to wait for her. We cannot confirm Anyang's teacher's intention, but Anyang perceived happiness, intimacy and trust towards her in the teacher-student relationship. Beyond the relationship in class, those feelings perceived by Anyang suggested her longing and the absence of those in other relationships.

As Anyang narrated, her parents *"were very obedient to the rules"*, as they never took her out of school, while others' parents *"took them out for a relaxing bath"*. It seemed that leaving campus itself represented happiness and possibly privilege for Anyang. In contrast, this young teacher managed to inform the guard and occasionally take her out. In this sense, Anyang was pleased about the special trips off campus, which included unique and special treatments. I assumed that the young teacher also treated them like sisters. Teachers in boarding schools usually work long hours and care for many students (Z. Zhu, Li, and Song 2019), but she was willing to take an extra step to cheer her students up.

Achievement, Recognition and Reward

"I ranked after the 20th when I entered junior high school, but I ranked first in our first monthly test. My teacher then noticed me. According to the rules, everyone would get a random allocation when we proceeded to the next grade, but my teacher told the head of my cohort that he wanted me to be in his class. Then, I was allocated to his class...When the school held the parent meeting, he knew my parents didn't want to come because they were far away from the school. He would assume that my parents wouldn't come. He also thought they would not need to attend this meeting. He trusted me very much because he never checked my homework."

"I had a good relationship with the head of my cohort as well. He was my math teacher in the first grade of junior high school. In our school, teachers usually picked several good students from each class to form a small class of students who had extra lessons

during the self-study time. I always attended that class, but I did not perform very well in the third grade. I mentioned this to the head of my cohort during lunch, and he added me to the class.”

“In senior high school, our head teacher was a history teacher. She was very strict. Our relationship was good, but she was not as close as my teachers in junior high school. She would contact the top ten students more, and I ranked 13th on the first test.”

Analysis

In Anyang’s relationships with her teachers, the main topic was study. According to Xiaoning Liu (2019), some teachers in boarding schools tended to concentrate more on study. She earned attention and recognition from her teachers with her good marks, which gave her some privileges at school. She received respect, trust and attention. In boarding schools, teachers are the only adults accessible to the students. The attention from teachers is limited and precious to students. Getting attention from the teachers might compensate for the lack of encouragement and praise for Anyang’s achievements from her parents. On the other hand, she felt that her teachers *“did not care much apart from her marks”*. She lost the teacher’s attention because her marks were not outstanding in class, which created the impression that the scores were what the teachers were after, rather than the students themselves.

However, it appears that her teacher showed empathy by acknowledging her parents’ inconvenience in attending meetings and allowing her into the class even when she did not perform well. Those moments were significant for Anyang because they offered validation and recognition of her in action, especially in the strict regulating system of boarding schools.

Anyang valued her relationships with both her family and her teachers, as their attention and care were precious to her. She could assertively speak her mind in front of her family and teachers, but she showed acceptance to her teachers rather than confrontational requests to her family when her needs could not be met. In teacher-student relationships, the lack of attention and care for boarders, as well as the reality of teachers’ capacity, was implicitly negotiated in the interactions between both parties. Through the narrative, it appears that there was a mutual acknowledgement of the

boundaries in the teacher-student relationship. The teachers focused mainly on academic performance, and students understood the capacity of their teachers in their work.

Peer Relational Portraits

It Takes Time

“My friends are mainly from my junior and senior high schools, especially from junior high. My relationships with them were close, and we keep in contact now because I lived with them daily; we did things together, and we had common topics. I wouldn’t talk to my teachers about my psychological issues because I would vent with my classmates.”

“I didn’t have good friends in the first year of my junior high school; there was no one from that year. In the second year, there were three. In my third year, one of my friends from the second year was in the same class as me. I have a group of friends who are very close together; three of them are from the third year. We are very good friends now. I hung out with them every day. We ate on campus together, talked about gossip, and had fun during the breaks. In the holidays, we celebrated birthdays, had meals, went to karaoke and shopping.”

“I did not remember much from my first year of senior high school. I didn’t know many people in that class. I don’t know. I was just getting by for a couple of months, and I don’t remember much about it. There was a division of subjects in the second year, and I chose the humanistic class. I reunited with some of my friends from junior high. Two friends in our group were in this class. One of them had a fixed partner for meals, so I ate with the other girl. She liked to deposit her money with me because she always lost money. Sometimes we forgot about whose money it was. We didn’t care much and just split it in half.”

Analysis

Across Anyang’s boarding school experiences, peer relationships played a significant role, providing her with company, support, and entertainment. She remembered each of her good friends’ classes and when they were together in the

same class. It seemed to me that she was talking about the departure and return of family members. There was also a pattern: When she entered a new stage of school, she did not have many friends in her first year there. Moreover, she also resisted leaving her primary school so much that she tried to fail the test because all her friends would be staying in the same school. In the boarding school environment, Anyang built very close relationships with her peers. Spending a lot of time together made it difficult for her to separate from them. From a relational perspective, the frequent separation from her family meant that her family relationships were unpredictable, so she relied on her relationships with peers. Entering junior or senior high school could cost her the peer relationship she built as a substitute for company and support on school days at the previous school. I could not completely attribute her difficult time in the first years to her separation from her peers. She faced some external difficulties from family and school. However, the transition of peer relationships is exacerbated by these external causes. Anyang clearly needed time to adapt to the new environment and build her relationships in it.

Clear Boundaries

“In the first year of junior high school, I changed my meal partner. I knew nothing when I first entered this class. I just did everything together with the girl next to me. Afterwards, she knew my brother didn’t get into the best universities. Then she said he was very ‘Cai’ (poor in level of skills). I was very angry, and I stopped talking to her...My friends came randomly. I would keep in contact with them for some time. If I felt comfortable with them, I would continue. Most of my friends are very similar to me in personality and thoughts.”

“I am quite conflicted sometimes. Sometimes, I just feel like being alone. If I don’t want to go out, I won’t go out no matter who asks me to, but sometimes I need to go out. For example, I would like to go grocery shopping with others. It is conflicting. The friends I made recently have a clearer sense of boundaries. We don’t dump everything onto each other all the time. In my close group of friends (she made in boarding school). They talked about issues in their romantic relationships with me. We are all good friends. I heard different things from both. I was caught in the middle, so I was annoyed and said I couldn’t take anything from you two. They never mentioned it to me again.”

Analysis

Boarders spent more time with their peers in boarding schools. In Anyang's case, relationships with friends were important. She needed a meal pal for company. Anyang's current life arrangements indicated that she was transitioning from some relational patterns she had adopted during her boarding years. She felt the need for both company and solitude, which could indicate that she did not always require company to fill the void left by her family's separation. As her family came together and provided her with more support, she sensed a greater sense of security and stability in her relationships. As a result, she no longer felt the need to have company all the time. What's more, the dynamics of peer relationships also changed for her. The peer relationships she built in boarding school were so close that they shared almost everything with each other. It was possible because they had a lot of time to process anything they shared together. In addition, it also showed their intimacy in the co-dependent relationships. However, as Anyang left boarding schools, she did not need or have the time for the extensive updates.

Across all her peer relationships, we could see Anyang's congruent expressions of her needs. Although she needed company in boarding schools and she had very close relationships with her friends, she could always hold her ground and keep some bottom lines in her peer relationships. This character showed that she valued her sense of self and that she had the capacity to assert it. From my perspective, this narrative suggests that Anyang's sense of self was not diminished by her boarding school experience as claimed by Schaverien (2015).

Summary

Anyang's narrative demonstrated her assertion of claiming visibility after her separation from her family due to the social and economic context in China. The effect of family separation from a young age was magnified by the boarding school setting. Unlike the suffering scripts of boarders, her narratives feature her active role in her family relationships. Her negotiation of closeness and distance with her family was not silenced by the boarding school environment. After reclaiming her family status, her family relationships remained her primary source of support. Anyang's assertion was

also evident in her relationships with peers and teachers, which supplemented her relationship with family.

5.3 Yanqi: All for the Achievement

Family Relational Portraits

Family Choice for Study

“I went to a boarding school in junior high school because the students were randomly allocated to the public schools near the residential area. The schools in my area weren’t very good, so my parents thought I could get a better education in a private boarding school. It was my father who decided on the boarding school. I had no concept of the quality of schools when I graduated from primary school, but my parents told me the promotion rates for those junior high schools. After the comparison, they said it would be better if I attended that (boarding) school. For me, there was not much of a difference between boarding school and day school. Right, I did not feel much then. After all, I attended junior high to get into a senior high. I attended a senior high to get into a university.”

“The senior high schools in my district were all boarding schools, maybe because I was in the rural part of our city. There was a strong mentality to excel, and the schools also indoctrinated. So, probably, they tended to lean towards oppressive learning a bit more (in boarding schools) rather than the easygoing way of study in day schools... There wasn’t much of a choice, as the system allocated me to a school based on my marks. I could, but wouldn’t choose a worse school with my marks.”

Analysis

Students in China face a competitive environment in terms of enrollment and employment. Yanqi and her family also faced the same issue. The family chose a private junior high boarding school based on the promotion rate to senior high schools. For Yanqi, she was naïve about the choice of school. Her limited information about schools came from her parents, who only mentioned “*promotion rates*”. The primary objective was to achieve a better result in the next stage. As for senior high school, there were only boarding schools in her district. Yanqi felt a sense of pursuit of excellence from the school settings in that region. Complying with academic pressure, she chose the best school she could attend based on her marks. Therefore, the

pressure was also passed down from the district to the schools, families, and students, which was spread across different units of society. It seemed that Yanqi was forced to accept this choice, as evidenced by her use of words like “*oppressive*” and “*indoctrinate*” in her narrative. The social norm was deeply ingrained, so she could not resist accepting it as her goal across all her schools.

From a relational perspective, the substantial academic pressure might overshadow other issues, including her relationships with her family. However, this pressure was widespread in her district, indoctrinated by her schools, recognised by her parents and carried by all her peers. Yanqi did not have a different experience from others. From her perspective, boarding could be the norm, especially in senior high school. After all, Yanqi did not live in a vacuum, but rather in her local community, where attending day school might be unusual, considering the time wasted on the commute. According to Wheeler and Suls (2020, 39), “if a social comparison involves a focus on the ways in which self and standard are similar, ... then the accessibility of standard-consistent self-knowledge is increased so that self-evaluations are assimilated toward the standard.” Through the lens of social comparison theory, when Yanqi considered the school settings of her peers in her community and her own, she found no difference, so she could not experience cognitive dissonance during the comparison process. She then assimilated the attendance of boarding schools towards the standard of pursuit of academic excellence. Through this process, Yanqi did not register attending boarding school as an issue but accepted it as an embedded regional norm in her narrative.

Drifting Away from Family

“After arriving at my school every week, I did not feel like getting out of the car, because I knew I would go for self-study as soon as I entered the school... The schedule was fixed every day at the boarding school. It was all planned by others. It was intensive and not very relaxed in general. The break between classes was only a few minutes, not a long time.”

“We had public phones in my high school. We could make phone calls with our own telephone cards. I didn’t really call my family because I didn’t have any issues. I went back home weekly. It was just five days. There was nothing much to say... I only called

them when there were significant issues, such as not having money in my school canteen card or needing them to prepare for my school trips. There was once when my grandma was in critical condition, and my headteacher received a call from my parents asking me to wait for my family at the school gate.”

“My father would usually ask me how I was in school this week on the car ride home. When we got home, my mother would ask me again. I’d become a bit perfunctory after they asked me a lot, so I just answered in one sentence. I felt too lazy to answer repetitive questions...The first meal was usually very hearty. The next two would be simpler but better than school meals. I could order dishes, and they would ask me what I would like for next week...I felt relaxed at home because when I was there, I could do whatever I wanted and really unwind a bit... I had no phone, so I mainly watched TV series and played computer games. I felt very immersed when I watched TV. It was my main source of relaxation.”

Analysis

In a term week, Yanqi spent one or two days at home. Although her time with her parents was limited, she did not appear to be affected by the limitation. The change in environment and reduction of contact time meant less about relational separation and more about her study time and the settings in boarding schools. She mentioned that she felt reluctant about school due to the academic pressure. There was no need to contact her parents, and the conversations felt repetitive to her. Her relaxation at home also had little to do with her parents. Her narrative about her parents does not focus on her relationship, but rather on her studies at school, which easily drifts from her separation and reunion with her parents to the packed school schedule and her immersion in TV series. Her relationship with her parents gave way to her intense studies and her leisure activities. Hence, the relational separation became irrelevant due to the increasing importance of academic achievement.

From the social perspective, the normalisation of separation from her parents was accorded with the normality of boarding schools in Yanqi’s region, where the narrative of parent-child separation from the high school stage is typical. Apart from societal normality, Yanqi also attributed her distant relationship with her parents to her adolescent rebelliousness: *“There was usually a period of rebelliousness. I can’t*

remember what I was rebellious about. I was not very obedient to my parents and felt they were too constraining sometimes.” According to Lerner and Steinberg (2004, 338), “changes in parent-adolescent relationships reflect declining dependence on parents...adolescents often actively avoid parents during stressful periods, rather than using them as a safe haven.” Yanqi’s narrative demonstrates her declining dependence on and even some defiance against her parents. For her, the regular boarding separation did not bring emotional suffering but served as time and space for her to avoid irrelevant contact or frequent questions. Instead, the separation could offer a buffer zone for potential parent-child conflicts during Yanqi’s adolescence.

Process of Relational Change

“When I blew up one exam accidentally, I wouldn’t tell my parents. I could have gotten more questions right, but I didn’t. This was not an accurate reflection of my capacity...However, I did not score high on an important mock test and really could not reach a higher score. I could ask my parents for advice: maybe I should take extra classes...I am studying abroad now. I contact my parents about once a month, probably by text. We check on each other. It is like a report to each other. We will make a call when it’s a festival or Chinese New Year. We don’t usually call each other.”

“Our relationship (parent-child) became more distant than our relationship in my childhood. We lived together when I was young and depended on them a lot. When I was older and started boarding, I would take care of myself a bit more. I wouldn’t need help from them in my daily life. There was less contact. Naturally, I wouldn’t stick with them (parents) every day. I feel closer to my parents now because I understand them more. Maybe they felt we had been gradually moving apart as we saw each other every day, and then once a week, and now maybe more than half a year.”

Analysis

In her relationship with her parents, Yanqi described a continuum of change from total dependence on her parents to material dependence, encompassing “*daily expenses and tuition fees*”. The biological and psychological changes that occurred during her adolescence initiated the process of change. In my opinion, the boarding school setting prompted her to experience separation from her parents and to take

care of herself at school. Knowing she could take care of herself, Yanqi contacted her parents less. In their interaction, she tended to convey a general image of herself rather than providing details of each mistake and fluctuation in her school life, which was functional and efficient in terms of practical and material support from her parents. In her life abroad, she continued with the “*report*” communication style with her parents.

Yanqi could have contacted her parents more often at the boarding school, but she chose not to call them because she felt she could take care of herself. After she “*understands her parents more*”, Yanqi chooses to maintain this communication style. The continuation of this style reflects the comfortable pace of the relationship between Yanqi and her parents. Therefore, the influence of the boarding school environment varies among students. In Yanqi’s case, the environment provided her with an opportunity to be independent of her parents. She took the chance, accepted the separation and adapted well to this new pattern. In this process, the presentation of family relationships did not change with the simple communication and physical distance, but her understanding moved her one step closer to her parents.

However, there seemed to be a lack of emotional exchanges between Yanqi and her parents. Practicalities dominated the content in their communication. To Yanqi, the change mainly occurred unilaterally on her side due to her adolescent rebelliousness and her thoughts about her parents’ perspectives. This was the case in our interview, where little emotional content was mentioned, even when I asked about it. From my perspective, this consistency suggested that Yanqi tended to prioritise practical issues over her emotional reactions.

Peer Relational Portraits

Adolescent Community

“I had a good friend in junior high school who lived in the next dormitory room. We loved joking around and understood each other’s humour, so we got along and felt relaxed together. Our marks were also similar. It felt like we could quickly get to each other’s point. After the evening study time, the kiosk closed soon, and we could only stay in the dormitory. The dormitory was not much fun, so we went to each other’s rooms, chatting with different classmates. We would plan for the following day: when

we meet in the morning and have breakfast together. We would perhaps also talk about what we did over the weekend, especially animation. We both love animation, so we usually chat about the animation we watched recently and our plot predictions.”
“I still remember chatting with friends while walking to the kiosk to buy food. There was some hot food in the kiosk, and also some junk food. The food in our canteen was too healthy. Children always love junk food. We could eat some while walking back and chatting together.”

“When I felt I failed an exam because I was careless, I would usually talk to my classmate. I could be very annoyed about the result and complain about the exam with my classmates: ‘How could I mess it up in this way!’”

Analysis

Yanqi’s narrative about friendship, especially in junior high school, shows her emotional exchanges with others at boarding school. With her parents, her communication was in a reporting fashion, and the content was limited to marks and well-being at school. In her communication with friends, animation, junk food, and small mistakes in exams were mentioned in a relaxed manner. The similarity with her friends made her feel understood, which aligned with the developmental pattern in the adolescent period when similar interests were possessed and tentatively understood in interactions with friends at school (Schneider and Tessier 2007).

As discussed in the previous section, boarding school provided Yanqi with space away from her family during her rebellious adolescence. With frequent contact with friends, the school was not only used as a haven to get away from parents. The dormitory space demonstrates this function of a boarding school, which was used as a communal space for peers of the same age to visit and socialise after a busy day of study, offering a chance to develop communication and socialisation skills. In the boarding school setting, Yanqi and her friends actively socialised with each other and created enjoyable moments together. The planning and organising showed her capacity to utilise her autonomy while away from home.

Peer as Study Partner

“In senior high school, we had a class reallocation at the beginning of the second year. I met a friend after it. She said she was in my primary school, but I didn’t remember much about her. Her class was probably next to mine, and we lived nearby then. We weren’t in the same dormitory when we met, but changed to the same room in the third year. Our friendship was more study-oriented. She was a better student than me, so I always asked her questions. She was diligent and concentrated on studying at school so that she could be my benchmark and a bit like a role model for me. I needed some encouragement. Everyone was striving hard for their marks in senior high. Some people got up at 4-5 am for breakfast and then went to study in the classroom. She was usually up around 5 am, and I woke up at 6 am. We usually communicated skills for exams. Sometimes, we also gossiped about our classmates because more people were in romantic relationships.”

“There were three canteens, and they did different cuisines. Everyone had their favourite one. I didn’t like her favourite canteen, so I had lunch with other friends... We also talked about hanging out together at the weekend. We would just wander around local shopping malls because we were too young. The frequency depended on the academic burden. We were free and could hang out after an important exam period had just finished. We might not go out if we had tight schedules preparing for the next exam... I was more independent in the dormitory. I actively cleaned and tidied our room. Because we were living together, we respected different routines. The usage of public space also needed to be negotiated. I did better in communicating with others.”

Analysis

In senior high school, Yanqi’s academic pressure was the main theme. Unlike the relaxing friendship in junior high school, the friendship at this stage revolved around studying. Yanqi’s interactions with her friend provided her with encouragement, practical skills, and company. This friendship seemed more purposeful in supporting her studies, and Yanqi was clear about her needs and role. In this sense, the effect of the benchmark and encouragement from this peer could be amplified by the boarding school environment, as they were easily accessible on campus.

Another theme in Yanqi's narration was her independence, consisting of twofold connotations. First, she maintained her independence in relationships with others. Although it could mean less contact with her friends, she did not compromise her appetite or study schedule. Yanqi also did not follow the benchmark wake-up time because she knew her pace. Her frequent contact with friends in boarding school did not lead her to rely heavily on them. Her firm individual identity meant she could focus more on her needs and goals. On the other hand, her life in boarding school also provided her with more opportunities to practice skills and develop the capacity to become an independent adult. Compared to junior high, Yanqi mentioned organisation and communication skills, especially in dealing with differences rather than similarities with others.

Yanqi's independent, individual style helped her in boarding school, but she also described her friends as *"phased friends"*. She lost connection with them as she entered the next stage of her life. Her narrative also reflected her limited need for relationships. In the moments she narrated, Yanqi prioritised other things over her relationship with her peers. To me, she seemed to focus more on her studies. She does need friends and can build friendships in new environments, but *"occasional interactions on social media"* would be enough for her.

Teacher Relational Portraits

Connected by Study

"My parents pulled some strings to get me into my class because the headteacher in that class was excellent. She said her class had the most students who progressed to the top senior high schools. She was like a star headteacher. So, she was actually very strict with class management and forbade electronic devices. She didn't really scold me because I followed the discipline and didn't get caught...She would talk to all the students in our class individually every several months. She would start with a few pleasantries like 'How have you been?' and move on to the aspect of study. Like a review of the study over the past few months, then the study goal and the plan to achieve it. She seldom cared about our personal lives."

“The headteacher in senior high was more approachable. She did not have too many requirements for my marks. Although she could get some bonus, she did not force us to study to an extreme extent...She would also visit students’ homes and talk with parents. It was mainly about the study: a review of the last semester, room for improvement, class performance, usually something good with one sentence of negative aspect. She was more straightforward with me.”

Analysis

Yanqi did not talk much about her teachers. In her narrative, the study and marks are salient. Her interactions with teachers primarily focused on the topic of study, which explained the reason for selecting a teacher, the teacher’s talks with students, and home visits. In the boarding schools, teachers were the only adults she saw on weekdays, and they were mainly connected by study. There were moments of kindness towards Yanqi, especially from the teacher in senior high, who did not put too much pressure on her and genuinely cared about her impressions in their communications with her parents. However, through her narrative, the study appears to be the priority and relationships with others were additional. According to Xiaoning Liu (2019), the teachers in boarding schools may stress excessively about the promotion rate without showing empathy for individual students. It seemed to be the case for Yanqi. However, despite the lack of contact with her parents in boarding schools, she appeared to perceive and accept the relationship with teachers as study-focused.

Through Yanqi’s different relationships, the boarding schools were narrated as more like institutions of study and, in some ways, workplaces. For her and the people around her, school achievement was the absolute priority. She was mature enough to live on campus and ready to leave her family. Peers and teachers were like colleagues and superiors. In her narratives, she shared some positive moments with her peers and worked collaboratively with them. The teachers were responsible for assigning study missions and conducting reviews with them. Those relationships at school seem connected to Yanqi mainly through study, like additional and replaceable components that come with attending school. In the interview, it also appeared to me that Yanqi and I were working towards finishing a job together. There were very few exchanges,

additional questions or comments. When analysing the narratives, I did not notice that I ignored her emotional exchanges with others, which might indicate that I also saw her as a co-worker and focused too much on her achievements at school.

The extremely selective and competitive job market and Chinese college entrance exam (Gaokao) created huge pressure for all parents and students in China, which is not only passed down to middle and primary schools but also accumulates because early education is the key foundation in the education system. (Gu, Ma, and Teng 2017) Consequently, the pressure started to accumulate when children were very young. For Yanqi, the boarding school environment was so closely tied to academic pressure that she perceived it and built her relationship around her academic achievements.

Summary

For Yanqi, boarding schools were the local norm in her region. The boarding schools represented the local social environment, emphasising academic achievements. With fewer strings attached to her family, the boarding school environment provided a means for her to achieve independence and academic success during her adolescence. As she adopted academic performance as the primary goal, the boarding schools meant efficient institutions. The relationships with peers and teachers were established around the main theme of study.

5.4 Hongying: Striving against Abuse

Contextual Portraits

When Home and School Both Failed

“When I was in the 5th grade of elementary school, some people started to post those things online. (Sigh...) It was basically some stupid love things among children. A boy liked me at that time, and a girl who liked this boy started to post on an online forum, which was a very popular online platform at that time. She said that I was filthy and called me a whore and other bad things. When I entered junior high school, people around me noticed those posts. People began to abuse me verbally and also hit me in the classroom. My teachers forbade me from entering the school because they thought I was a temptress. The headteacher also forbade me from entering the classroom or attending lessons. I was told to stand outside the classroom. Nobody was allowed to talk to me. I remember a classmate borrowing a pen from me. The teacher asked: ‘Why did you talk to her? I said no talking to her!’ This classmate was penalised for copying a six-page article about astronauts by hand. I was isolated from everyone.”

“My parents were not at home most of the time because of work. I was followed and sworn at on the streets. I often hid in a local supermarket upstairs.”

“It was so severe that a boy touched my body in class. I reported to the teacher. I think I was very brave at that time. When I reported to the teacher, the teacher said I should consider my reputation... She asked me not to report. Otherwise, this would be posted on a piece of paper at the school gate, which would affect your reputation.”

“They called my parents in, and they wouldn’t believe me. My parents said it was my problem and asked me to apologise to the teachers and students at school. Nothing was resolved, and I could not tolerate it anymore. Because I could not attend class, my marks fell sharply.”

“I brought up school transferring to my parents, but they disagreed. They thought I should persevere. I was supposed to register for my junior high school on the first day of second grade. I rode my bike to escape from my family and did not attend the

registration. My parents finally caught me and said if I did not want to go, I could transfer to another school."

(My parents) *"still did not believe me,"* (but I) *"would rather die than go back to my original school."* Finally, they offered her two choices: either another day school or a boarding school. Although her determination did not win over her parents' hearts, at least Hongying did not need to return to her original school.

"My parents thought that boarding school could constrain me, and also, there were more people from different regions. They might not know about my past. My parents did not believe in me, so I didn't want to stay with them for too long... I hoped to isolate myself from my family. My parents and I decided on boarding school together."

Analysis

The narrative presented in this section takes place before Hongying's experience at boarding school, which provides crucial context for understanding the choice to transfer, her boarding school experience and her relationships with others there.

The lies about Hongying started online. The stigma of whore was put on her in elementary school on an online forum. This denigration took advantage of the cyberbullying's anonymity and accessibility, which could spread it to a broader audience and make the victim experience repeated fear of bullying (Kowalski, Limber, and Agatston 2008). The rumour was then picked up by her peers in high school, and the bullying started. It was a fragmented experience for Hongying as she was not bullied by her peers when the rumour was formed, but after she entered a new environment. Her peers, teachers and parents chose to believe an online rumour rather than Hongying's statement in person. According to Thornberg et al. (2013), most bullying starts with the victim's difference or deviance, and bullying usually begins in the first grade at school or in a new class at school. The conspicuous rumour was novel for her new peers, who utilised it as a stigma to isolate and bully Hongying. It was as if Hongying was not a normal peer but an evil and heinous configuration of many wrongdoings. From Hongying's perspective, the unexpected discovery and spread of the rumour could be shocking for her to accept, let alone the bullying behaviours.

To understand Hongying's narrative, it is essential to introduce relevant theories about bullying to foreground the discussion of her relational experience at boarding school. Olweus (2010, 2) argues that there should be three elements of bullying: "aggressive behaviour or intentional 'harm doing'; carried out repeatedly and over time; in an interpersonal relationship characterised by an actual or perceived imbalanced power or strength". In Hongying's narrative, her peers aggressively abused her verbally and physically. Those behaviours did not cease after several occurrences but continued to happen and affect Hongying in her first year at junior high. She was also isolated and abused by her group of peers at school. The number of peers abusing her made her powerless in her peer group, which in turn led to the power imbalance in her individual relationships. Besides, the gender difference also made it difficult for her to fight back against the sexual abuse. Before her transfer to boarding school, the three elements of bullying were enacted in those narrative portraits of Hongying.

From a social perspective, I think that the bullying received by Hongying was institutional and gendered. In her narratives, she not only received bullying from peers, but the teachers also reinforced her exclusion by denying her access to classrooms, enforcing silence, and penalising peers for interacting with her. The power dynamic between teachers and students in school meant that Hongying had to follow her teachers' instructions and endure the abuse, which reflected the systematic abuse of power in bullying (Sharp, Smith, and Smith 2002). From being called a "whore" online in elementary school to being labelled a temptress by teachers, Hongying was cast into a role of deviance rooted in sexist assumptions. Her body and morality became subjects of public judgment, while the boy who harassed her faced no consequences. When she bravely reported the sexual assault, she was told to stay silent "*for the sake of her reputation*", reflecting the social norms positioning girls and some as responsible for anticipating and managing boys' and men's sexual desires (Mishna et al. 2020). Hongying's case illustrates not only peer bullying but also the gendered silencing mechanisms embedded within institutional responses.

In this hopeless situation, Hongying did not give in. She refused to register with this school for the new academic year and received two choices from her parents. Hongying made her decision based on her relationships with others. In her peer relationships, she might get away with the stigma and bullying because there were

more students from distant regions in boarding schools. In her relationship with her parents, she chose boarding school to minimise contact time with them and gradually to “*isolate myself (herself) from her family*” because of the distrust. The narratives continue with these two relational threads about Hongying in the context of boarding schools.

Peer Relational Portraits

The Need for Closeness

“Even though there was still abuse in the boarding school, I could attend classes...I was still alone in the boarding school, and the situation did not change much. It’s just that the students in my dormitory would not, at least not swear at me in my face. I did everything by myself.”

“I did make one friend who was willing to talk to me. I treated her genuinely. We were in the same dormitory room. I helped her whenever she faced difficulties. Sometimes, I even gave her some money when she did not have enough. ...I felt good at that time. At least I didn’t feel completely alone. I was grateful that she did not leave me alone when my teachers and peers abused me.”

“However, when I graduated from junior high school, I heard from others that she (this friend) told others that I was only nice to her because I wanted to have an ugly friend to set off my beauty. We have never contacted each other since then. That was my only friend in this boarding school.”

“I met her in my first grade in junior high school when I received severe bullying from others. We had not seen each other since I transferred to the boarding school. We reconnected in the first grade of my senior high school and got closer in the second grade when we applied to be in the same dormitory room.”

“She is my only friend in my whole life, until now... At that time, we were like normal besties, you know. We talked to each other about everything. We sometimes went home together because our homes were close. We took the bus home together... We would also hang out when we were home. It was just 5 minutes away from my home to hers, so we would go out on Saturdays and Sundays. We were in the same class

in the second grade of senior high school. She was my deskmate. We were together every day...The only happy moment I can remember from boarding school was when she celebrated my birthday. We lit the fireworks at the school gate. I was so happy.”
“Sometimes we slept in the same bed. This is the most intimate thing I could do with a human being...One day, when we went for a walk, she asked me if I would like to try to be together. I said yes. It was very simple. She was the only person who helped me, the only person who stood on my side. She was my only light. The feeling was unique, unspeakable, yet genuine...So we became girlfriends. I am not homosexual. It was—right, she said we did not differentiate the feelings we had for each other. We broke up during university. We are still friends now, (she is) still my only friend. Perhaps because she was the only person who existed by my side, I misunderstood it as real love at a very young age.”

Analysis

In the boarding school, Hongying could communicate with her peers without teachers' interference. Surrounded by peers, the loneliness became salient for her in all kinds of activities, especially when others kept abusing her. To alleviate the effects of loneliness and bullying, she needed company, someone on her side in the boarding school. According to Weiner et al. (2012, 410), “A single close friend may help to alleviate the negative ‘cost’ of being disliked and isolated by peers.” The approval, support and familial base of security provided by friendship could be essential for Hongying in an abusive environment. In the context of Chinese culture, due to the departure from family and neighbourhood, there is a focus on the interdependent self, which entails the interdependence and coordination between the self and others in the boarding school environment (Wu and Bian 2020).

With this friend she met in junior high school, Hongying was no longer alone. She could talk to someone. She had one company in a large group of peers at a boarding school, so she was not an outstanding individual. The support of this friend alleviated the abusive behaviours. As an essential element for Hongying, this period of friendship provided approval, support, and a safe space. Hongying also tried to build an interdependent relationship by helping this friend with no effort spared. However, the revelation of this friend's concealed thoughts might feel like a retraction of the

support she received and a failure in building an interdependent relationship. Moreover, this friendship was marred by the history of stigma and misunderstanding when she was wronged again by her friend, who believed Hongying had ulterior motives for befriending her, which added another layer of doubt to her self-identity.

Hongying's friend in senior high school not only offered her support and approval, but she also felt open, safe, free, and comfortable in this relationship. Hongying spent most of her time with this friend, who, according to Hongying, was like her "*normal bestie*". Compared to others, this friendship was the only 'normal' relationship Hongying had in school. There was "*normal*" sharing, company, and intimacy without all the horrible stigma and rumours between them, which Hongying had been desiring for so long. However, the establishment and maintenance of this friendship must be difficult for them in an abusive environment because of the isolating nature of bullying (Monks and Coyne 2011). In addition, genuineness and acceptance also helped Hongying explore her identity and accept herself as a whole and real person, which was rare for her in an abusive environment.

In the boarding school environment where parents are absent, it is difficult to get by without any friends. For Hongying, it was even more difficult because of the abuse she received from her peers. She cherished her friendships and made an effort to help and support her friends. Those friendships were so precious and helpful that she only focused on the caring part of them. In her first friendship, there was a potential mismatch or incongruence, but Hongying needed support. In her second friendship, they got so close that the definition and boundaries of friends were blurred. The difficulties Hongying faced were too overwhelming for her to reflect on her friendships, which were her only source of relief. In the environments saturated with betrayal and abuse, Hongying allowed herself to trust only when she found genuine care. From my perspective, the sharp distinction between "good" and "bad" peers could be an adaptive response to adversity, which she utilised to survive in such conditions.

Striving hard

In the boarding schools, the effect of the rumour was alleviated by the connection she built, but it did not disappear. "*Many people would give me money directly, asking to have sex with me. Those were students whom I did not know. Some teachers would,*

how do I say this, hold me in their arms in front of other students, at the door of the classroom...I was the only student who could not wear my clothes because teachers told me to wear the uniform. They said that I shouldn't attract others or cause trouble... Female teachers in my senior high school told me not to wear skirts because there were uncivilised construction workers in the school, but many girls were wearing skirts...No matter which classroom I were in, the teacher would tease me: 'Celebrity is here.' Also, some students put sexy lingerie at the door of my dormitory. Teachers said nothing about that."

Hongying was told that she "should not fight back" because she "was supposed to be gossiped about". "There was nobody, but at that time, actually, I tried to look for protection, so I attempted to get into a romantic relationship with the head of the gang in our school, so that nobody could mistreat me. He drugged me. Yes, it was such a tragedy."

Studying was the main theme in high school, but Hongying struggled to study. "My marks were good when I entered junior high school. I ranked in the top 100 in my city. I was not allowed to study in the first grade in junior high, so I lost the chance to build a solid foundation in the subjects...I found it difficult to concentrate when people were shouting, 'Han Hongying is a bitch.' In senior high school, I was affected by an episode of mental illness. I could not remember things well, so I could not study very well."

"I ran very fast. I was the top runner in the whole city. I could run 800 metres for 2 minutes and 46 seconds... I entered the best senior high school as a student with a sports speciality...I also went to train my performative skills as my extra speciality to get into a university, so my schedule was packed."

"Although many people were very critical of me, only people in my year knew about my rumours. There were many fan girls of mine in the lower grades. Because I was independent and actively engaged in various school activities, such as hosting, dancing, and running. I was quite good at those, so many students from lower grades liked me. They would leave some presents for me in my dormitory."

"I felt very torn. Students in lower grades were completely different to me, but students in my grade were brutal to me. I couldn't really take the students in lower grades as my friends. It was only one-sided. Perhaps I wanted to get closer to them, but I was

affected by previous effects. I was afraid to hurt and implicate them, so I would deliberately refrain from contacting others.”

Analysis

Living with peers in the boarding school, Hongying could attend classes but still suffered from abusive peers and teachers. As discussed previously, the bullying she received was repetitive, institutional and gendered, which continued in the boarding environment and extended to her dormitory, but she did not give in. On the contrary, she applied different strategies to strive against the stigma and bullying without help from her parents. In the first part of the narrative, Hongying recalled offering a romantic relationship to the gang leader as a way to secure protection. It was a desperate strategy, one born not out of desire, but out of survival. F. Liu and Lv (2021, 50) described this form of response as “uniting striving,” where the individual seeks adults or peers as allies to shield themselves from harm. Hongying tried it with teachers and parents, but her request was met with dispute. In this case, she also did not get support but was drugged. After repeated betrayals from those she turned to, the consequences of those attempts were unhelpful and even harmful to Hongying. Those relational experiences could suggest that asking for help from others is challenging, which could be essential in a boarding school setting.

Hongying also strived to develop other specialities. On the one hand, she needed those to continue her education because her study was significantly disrupted by bullying and abusive behaviours. On the other hand, she was using indirect transference striving: “The bullied may indirectly make up for the stigmatisation by acquiring some skills.” (F. Liu and Lv 2021, 50). She succeeded in those specialities, bringing her to the next stage in education and some admirers from other grades.

As her interviewer, I felt Hongying’s endeavours to achieve her goals and do herself justice. I was angry that she had to face all these treatments. I was also awed to see her capacity to adapt to the relationships in the boarding school environment. She did not passively accept bullying and fall prey to its impact. Instead, she consistently utilised all the relational resources and different strategies in the context of boarding schools. The environment of boarding schools could make bullying unavoidable, but it could also enable and prompt Hongying to actively respond to the

bullying. In Hongying's account, she used uniting and indirect transference striving strategies to mitigate the effect of bullying, even though she was told that she "*should not fight back*". Wu and Bian (2020)'s research demonstrated that resilience was the most adopted positive attitude when boarders faced difficulties in Chinese boarding school settings, which entailed resilient cognition and behaviours. Facing extreme adversity, Hongying's narrative demonstrated her resilience in identifying challenges, devising strategies, seeking help, and regulating her emotions. The setting of the boarding school, in Hongying's case of bullying, did not deter her resilience in fighting against the systematic bullying.

The separation from distrusting parents in boarding school settings shifted Hongying's focus from her family to school, prompting her interactions with peers. According to Wu and Bian (2020, 83), apart from the "interdependent self" rooted in the Chinese culture, Chinese boarders also developed their "independent self" at boarding schools due to the lack of care from family. For Hongying, being independent was necessary not only due to the boarding school environment but also because of her parents' disbelief in her. In a boarding school environment where independence was widely adopted and celebrated, she was liked by "*fan girls*" because of her "*independence*". It seems that the admiration could offer her a momentary escape from the emotional burden of having to distance herself from a family that failed to trust or protect her.

As Hongying continued to receive denials of her own identity, she began to internalise some of the traits and incorporate them into her own identity. When she strived to get protection, she offered a romantic relationship to the powerful man. Compared to reporting to parents or teachers, the internalisation of stigma made her aware that she could make use of herself in a relational trade for protection. Having won many admirers, Hongying convinced herself not to establish relationships with students from other grades. It was as if she were contaminated, which stemmed from the stigma she received. In Thornberg et al. (2013, 316)'s arguments about the bullying process, this was the "internal victimising", where the victim "incorporated the victim-image...at the same time as they tried to develop strategies in order to protect themselves, which in turn and paradoxically often actually supported the bullies' agenda and confirmed the socially constructed image." This process was reflected in

Hongying's narrative. In the context of boarding school, the absence of parents and frequent interactions with peers might accelerate the process of incorporation and, consequently, the internal victimising (Thornberg et al. 2013).

Reconnection

"I felt I could breathe a bit after coming here," Hongying said when describing her current relationships with her peers. "I do have some friends now. I don't know how to make friends. I don't know how to define friendship. Anyway, we can have meals together, because I have never had meals with others before, except for the only friend I had. I can now sit with many others. We have meals together, cook together and go to class together. I felt it was fantastic and exotic."

"For the first time, I invited my friends to attend my birthday celebration. I was so nervous. I was wondering how to send the invites. It was at that very moment that I realised I actually had people I could invite to my birthday celebration. I really have friends. But honestly, I didn't know how to communicate. I was very nervous. Even if I know they regard me as their real friend, I still don't know how to respond...I really don't know how to chat with others. Sometimes, I will ask ChatGPT or other friends how to reply...Fortunately, I am good at pretending, so I can easily put on a disguise to become an extroverted and sociable person."

Analysis

While enjoying the moment with her friends, Hongying could not believe she now had a group of friends, which felt so different from her previous peer interactions. She was accepted as a member in many activities, but her narratives showed that she was still impacted by the bullying, especially insecurity in relationships and fear of social encounters because of the lingering internal victimising (Thornberg et al. 2013). With reluctance and fear, she connected with others and engaged in different events. Moreover, she tried to host a birthday party and invite others over. Instead of refusing to establish relationships, her wish to connect with peers thrived in an environment without bullying and abuse.

Hongying had difficulties communicating with her friends. She was unsure if she was doing the right thing and sought references from others, including ChatGPT.

Based on her previous experiences, she was capable of establishing friendships. Research about boarders and school bullying victims also suggests that those experiences could bring sensitivity and social skills through interactions and reflections in different relationships (Thornberg et al. 2013; Wu and Bian 2020). I think Hongying's struggle here was about her identity. After all the external and internal victimising, she felt safe *"pretending"* in disguise. The acceptance she experienced in this friend group shed light on her true self. There was an internal conflict in choosing the identity she wanted to show in this friend group, creating uncertainty and doubt. The current peer group was new, but she felt safe exploring herself in those relationships. I believe Hongying was in the process of reconnecting with herself, as she narrated from *"I don't know how to make friends. I don't know how to define friendship."* to *"I actually had people that I could invite for my birthday celebration. I really have friends."* in our interview.

Family Relational Portraits

Escape from the Chaos

Before the rumour, Hongying felt happy about her family: *"My parents rode a motorcycle to pick me up from school. I sat between them. I felt so happy and loved. I had a family at that time."* After the rumour spread, her parents did not believe in her and even blamed her when she needed support.

"My roommates would call their parents every day. I would not contact them unless there was an important matter. They would call the teachers and let me know...I didn't see them very often, about once a month on weekends. I was alone most of the time...They were busy with work. I had no sense of family at that time."

"It was an awkward situation. I was not familiar with them, and I also held a bit of hatred towards them. It was so awkward. Our main themes were 'Do you have enough money?' and 'How are your exams?' We had one meal together; they bought me some clothes, and then I left home...I had no emotional support from them. I also received less money from them than my peers."

"I did not sleep well at boarding schools, but I couldn't sleep at home. I liked lying on the windowsill and watching the sky all night long...I had to pretend that I was alright"

and tough. I felt very tired. I would rather be at school; it was OK to be alone ... For me, going home was like going to boarding school. I went to the boarding school called home. I went there and did everything I needed to do and returned to my normal life at school.”

“During the school holidays, I wish the term time could start earlier...I did not feel comfortable in either environment. If I had to choose, I would choose term time over holidays at home. Whenever it was Friday, I knew my parents were coming home. I felt very nervous and sad. I wished they would not come back. My heart was tight when the door opened.... On Sunday evening, I went back to my room and felt happy because that was the last part of a holiday weekend. I would pretend to be asleep on Monday morning, and they didn't want to say goodbye to me before they left anyway. I felt so happy on Sunday evening.”

Analysis

In Hongying's narrative, she felt content with her parents before the rumour, and she perceived a significant change and unfamiliarity in her family after the rumour spread. The drastic change challenged Hongying's existing internal working model with the attachment figures (Mikulincer and Shaver 2016). The refusal and denial perceived by Hongying from her parents led to her avoidance and dismissiveness in her family relationships. However, she still needed financial support from her parents, which required her engagement with them. In her narrative, she had to pretend to be *“alright and tough”* to satisfy her parents while facing the bullying at school. Hongying felt awkward and torn in the ambivalent situation. The boarding school environment, on the other hand, offered her a sanctuary where good peers and bad peers were separated and distinct. She felt more comfortable with the stability of polarisation.

I sensed a strong sense of absence in Hongying's narrative with her family. I barely felt any connections between them when she was home. The lack of connection left Hongying alone with all the bullying and disbelief. At school, Hongying might be busy with study and social life, as the structured environment in boarding schools can help some boarders compared to their unstable home environment (Schaverien 2015). The home environment was where she had to face herself without any support. Hongying's parents were also busy with work. They did not have much time to spend

with her. Hongying had to deal with the separation from her parents. It could be better to actively choose to go to boarding school and to separate from her parents than to accept parental abandonment passively. As discussed before, peers' adoption and valuing of independence in boarding school could be helpful for Hongying to accept her need to distance herself from her parents. Moreover, Hongying did not recall any emotional or physical help from her parents. I couldn't help but wonder if, seeing their daughter as resilient and independent, her parents viewed her decision as permission to withdraw further, believing that boarding school could take care of what they no longer needed to.

Not Good Enough

"When I had the 800 metres enrolment running test to get into senior high school. I ran 3 minutes and 6 seconds, but because I ran on the wrong track, I fainted on the track at the end. I still got the first place. When I woke up, my mom's reaction was anger. She took me to the car without saying anything to me, and then she was furious: 'It was such a short run, and you could even faint. I don't care if you get first place or not. You ran so slow this time.' When I attended dancing events, I got a fever of nearly 40 °C during the rehearsal. My mom said I was faking it. She told me to sit and watch other people dancing."

"I also experienced amnesia after surgery to remove my tumour. They (Hongying's parents) did not believe me. I could not read or find my way home. They just wouldn't believe it...I also had some dissociative symptoms: I could not control myself, and I felt like another person, so I went to a psychiatric hospital. They picked me up from the psychiatric hospital and sent me right to the cram school. They accused me of escaping exams, but come on, who would put themselves into a psychiatric hospital to escape an exam?!"

The dynamic changed because of an incident. *"I often fainted on the street, but this time I wanted to commit suicide. I took many pills and walked to the street. I was hit by an electric bicycle. If I had fallen to the side of the motorway, I would have been dead. Luckily, I fell to the side of the pavement. It took me half a year in bed to recover ...I told everyone it was an accident because I could not explain it clearly to*

everyone. My parents did not know what happened. They thought it was an accident. I was seeking an end to my life.”

“My parents’ attitudes towards me changed. They cared about me. I was living with my grandma. My mom came home every weekend, and my father usually came right after work to see me. They started to chat with me and asked how I was doing. When I felt tired of studying, they said I needed rest...When I was choosing a university to study for a master’s degree. My father said that we didn’t have to choose universities with the highest rankings. I couldn’t believe his words. It was impossible. My father said I didn’t need to win and that I could do what I liked. It felt like a miracle.”

Analysis

Hongying put great effort into those specialities, but her parents did not believe her as they did not believe the rumours and bullying she received. The specialities Hongying was proud of were devalued by her parents. She received no encouragement or celebration at home and felt she was never good enough to meet her parents’ standards. This mistrust was amplified by the limited contact within the boarding school context. Consequently, Hongying did not go home often, which created a vicious cycle.

In Hongying’s relationship with her parents, she received harsh parenting characterised by low acceptance and high strictness. The harsh parenting could have affected Hongying’s self-esteem, which, in turn, contributed to the suicide, especially in the Chinese context (J. Zhao and Wang 2023). Additionally, family relationships differ from those in peer groups at school. Children cannot change their parents and have to adapt to them. The power imbalance suppressed Hongying’s attempts to fight back. She had to live with the denials of her words and performances in her family, where failure or rest were not allowed. Moreover, she could not reach out to others as there were no other resources for Hongying.

In retrospect, I also sensed that Hongying was striving very hard in our interview. It could be difficult for her to talk about the experience of bullying with a male stranger she met for 15 minutes. From my perspective, part of her determination to start and continue this interview in a vivid fashion could also be her relational pattern to prove

herself to me, to make me believe that those experiences were real and hurt. This relational dynamic might also enact between me as a writer and the reader.

In Hongying's narrative, her view of her parents changed at the start of the rumour and after her suicide attempt. *"I had a family before the 5th grade"*, said Hongying. It seemed that she needed to split her view and experience of her parents into good and bad, "in such a way to minimise the anxieties" (Bronstein 2001, 36). In the serious bullying and abuse, Hongying had to utilise splitting to manage her relationships with others. Even when she was desperate under the harsh parenting ("the bad"), she was reminded that she was lovable within her loving family ("the good"). After the suicide attempt, Hongying could not believe her parents' change of attitude. The acceptance from her parents conflicted with all the denials she received. She wondered if this would last. Hongying needed time to process this and integrate those split experiences. I think the integration started to crack as she gradually accepted help from her family. She said: *"My father and mother are OK now"*.

Summary

Hongying's narratives illustrated her striving against abuse. She had hoped that the boarding school could be her safe haven from the abuse from the day school and family, but she still received abuse in the boarding schools. Under the boarding school setting, she faced the bullying on her own. To mitigate the impact of bullying, she established and utilised various relationships, where she experienced concealment, intimacy, objectification, and admiration. The boarding schools also served as psychological and physical buffers, providing her with distance from her parents, from whom she felt the need to withdraw. Although the bullying was traumatic for her, Hongying's account reflects her resilience, encompassing her capacity to resist victimisation, reconcile with her parents, and form new social bonds in the aftermath.

5.5 Jieying: On the Journey to Become Independent

Family Relational Portraits

Unmet Need in the Adaptation

Jieying started attending boarding school in her junior high school. She and her parents decided on this school because of the “*excellence in academic performance*”.

“My parents thought since it was a boarding school, it would be better to follow the rules. They told me not to be the special one.”

“All the books of homework piled up like a mountain. I had never seen this much in my primary school. The teacher on duty was relaxing by browsing through magazines in the front of the classroom. I thought I was so miserable. I was crying while completing my assignments...It [the atmosphere at the boarding school] was very competitive and toxic. Classmates would observe you when you studied. When they did not want to study, they would interfere with your study. When they studied hard, they still did not want you to study.”

“My father would cook delicious food for me on the weekend. It’s nice, but I think what I wanted more was the company, but they didn’t give me... My mother thought I needed extra nutrition when I was growing up during my second and third grades in junior high school. She thought it could help me grow taller by delivering handmade soup to the school reception.”

“I needed you (her parents) to listen to me, to give me solutions... junior high school was a completely alien environment for me. The pressure suddenly came from all aspects of my life. At that time, I really needed them to listen to me, but they did not... When I said that I was suffering from pressure, my father was like, ‘Who does not face pressure in their life?’ They did not want to talk about this. I could only talk about good news.”

Analysis

The decision to attend boarding school was made by Jieying’s parents. The reasons given by her parents were “*academic excellence*” and “*conforming to discipline and the majority*”. Academic excellence was a communal goal for Jieying

and her parents. Facing the pressure of exams, they agreed that attending boarding school could save time for studying. As for discipline and conformity, Jieying had not experienced those, but she thought she was more independent compared to her peers, which gave her confidence in attending a boarding school. Those rationales also gradually blended into Jieying's belief system. In her relationship with her parents, Jieying was respected as a child with explanations from her parents. Rationales are often given to the child to explain the separation of attending boarding schools. In the UK, boarding schools were justified in the name of privilege (Schaverien 2015), which reflected the hierarchy in British society and culture. In the rationale Jieying received, the advantage in academic performance could be related to competitiveness in school due to the limited societal resources and the unitary evaluation system in China (Xing, Leng, and Ho 2021). Conforming could be based on the notion of the "interdependent self" in Eastern culture, which emphasises interdependency and a sense of belonging to a group (Shi 2013). In this interaction, Jieying inherited the values and notions of life from her parents and used this system to understand her experience and create her narrative.

In the boarding school, Jieying was accompanied by teachers and peers, but she found it difficult to relate to them. Jieying tried to seek help and support from her parents. Schaverien (2015) argues that many boarders suffered from bereavement in their broken attachments to their family members. Unlike the British system, the boarders could reach out to their parents over the weekends in Jieying's and most Chinese boarders' contexts. Hence, the process experienced by Jieying seemed more likely to be an adaptation to the new relational pattern with her parents, with difficulties in establishing new and diverse relationships with teachers and peers. Because it occurred in a boarding school environment, Jieying was learning to cope with the changes on her own, which could be a significant departure from her previous pattern of relating to others with her parents' help.

From Jieying's perspective, her parents did offer her care and support, but she did not feel content. Jieying was grateful for the effort and said she could not do that for her children. It is clear that her parents were willing to support Jieying. Although she validated the amount of effort her parents devoted, her emotional needs were unmet. There was a discrepancy in their understanding of Jieying's needs due to the

lack of effective communication between Jieying and her parents. The selective listening to Jieying's good news also shut the door to Jieying's emotional expression, enlarging the discrepancy in understanding. As a result, the parent-child attachment between Jieying and her parents deteriorated. M. Li et al. (2015) found that the parent-child attachment of Junior high school students had a positive prediction on school adjustment. For Jieying, the lack of support from her parents also made it difficult for her to adjust to and explore relationships at the boarding school. Therefore, the abrupt emotional and physical separation affected her family interactions, where the insecurity derived. While she was adapting to the new boarding environment, the insecurity could result in her reluctance to connect with others.

Negotiating Independence: Journey between School and Home

As a boarder, Jieying had more than one bag of books. She had to bring all the necessary items for school and home.

"It was a 5-minute drive from school to home, very close. Normally, they would not pick me up from school for weekends, when they were very busy. I had to walk back home. It would take half an hour to walk back home, but it would be 5 minutes by car, really close."

"The pickup time was usually 2 pm to 4 pm in the daytime. It was still working time, an awkward timing anyway. My home was not so far away. I didn't know what they thought about this. I just guessed they might think that I could drag my bags home at a very slow pace and reach home."

"I would like to attend school and go home daily in the third grade of my junior high school. I knew they probably did not want to pick me up or drop me off, so I said I would cycle home. They finally allowed me to do it."

In senior high school, the academic pressure of boarding school increased, so Jieying did not go home every weekend.

"When I was in senior high school, I went back home every few weeks. I would always bring many snacks and daily necessities with me, often in a big bag. My father sent me to the gate of our dormitory. I did not know where this thought came from, but I thought other students' parents would help their children with the bags. However, I was there alone with my heavy backpack stuffed with all the textbooks and this big

bag with all my other belongings. I got out of my father's car with those heavy bags, walking alone. I felt so helpless."

"They did not want to pick me up when I was young. They would procrastinate or complain about driving me home or to school. When I entered university, it was still in the same city. I needed to go across a wide river to attend the university. It could be from 30 to 50 minutes by car. I would ask my father to pick me up. There were fewer complaints gradually. He would drop me off at the campus quietly."

The journey also changed after she began her studies abroad.

"Last time, when I went home by plane, I thought it was quite convenient for me to take the subway home. The station is very close to my home. But my father actively offered to pick me up from the airport. My parents took my little sister together to welcome me at the airport. I feel that is quite interesting. I asked you to pick me up when I was young, and you would not come. Now I am a grown-up. When you realised I was leaving you, you knew that you should pick me up."

Analysis

The journey between school and home was arduous for Jieying, a mixture of struggle, confusion and helplessness. After a week of intense study, she faced an additional half-hour struggle to get home, while her parents could have easily spent minutes picking her up. Jieying was upset about carrying her heavy bags of books and other necessities, as well as the psychological burden of facing all the difficulties alone. She could accept attending boarding school, but she felt the need to be accompanied and helped on her way there. According to Jieying, she was *"forced to be independent"*. She said, *"In retrospect, independence was good for me, but I just took it passively...My parents asked me to accept it, and I managed to find my way through it."* The shift overnight could be sudden and absolute for Jieying. The unpleasant journey for Jieying was likely a result of her parents' *"tendency to cultivate her capacity to be independent"*. This notion of independence was reflected throughout this narrative. Independence is considered a desirable quality in China, and a process of individuation in psychology for children around this age (Dai and Jia 2012). When Jieying faced difficulties alone at the boarding school, she viewed them as steps toward independence, which helped her overcome challenges. In Jieying's narrative,

the difficulties were not only her parents' laziness or unwillingness to help her, but also their intentional guidance in cultivating her independent personality. In her relationship with her parents, intentional cultivation represents her parents' love and care towards Jieying rather than an entire abandonment. It was acceptable and motivating for her to perceive the difficulties this way.

In her last year of junior high school, she did not ask her parents for help with her journeys between home and school. From my perspective, Jieying's acknowledgement of his parents' unwillingness to help marked her acceptance of the fact that she had to become independent. Moreover, Jieying used cycling home independently as leverage to negotiate with her parents. This shift from passively seeking help to actively utilising her independence demonstrates her adoption of the notion of independence, which became an internalised part of herself. From a relational perspective, Jieying's role also shifted from one of obedience and conformity to her parents to initiating negotiations with leverage, which demonstrated her independence within the family interactions. Additionally, the emphasis on independence in negotiation suggests that she and her parents considered her independence to be valuable for both parties. In our interview, Jieying said, *"It was the start of my independence. Since it was the start of it, my parents should naturally have less connection with me."* From this perspective, Jieying and her parents were in sync: Jieying was trying to become independent, and her parents were helping her by offering her less support. In this sense, boarding school was not a difficult separation for them, but an *"accelerator of the independence process"* according to Jieying.

When Jieying had autonomy and physical capacity for her journey to school, her family's attitudes towards her changed. They were more willing to help her with fewer complaints. From her parents' emotional and physical unavailability during her time at boarding school, Jieying formed an independent sense of self and utilised it in her relationship with her family, which became her attachment working model in this specific relationship (Mikulincer and Shaver 2016). Under the premise of this working model, she expected the complaints that she had always experienced in the past, but instead, she received neutral responses and even warm welcomes from her parents. Jieying perceived the change in her interactions with her parents as conflicting with the existing working model she adopted. For her, the discrepancy between the model

and her encounters after growing up felt like a regression from the cultivation of independence as a good quality, which added to her confusion. Although there is still some confusion, Jieying can choose her own way home as an independent and active agent.

School Relational Portraits

Junior High School: Intense, Competitive, Detached

“The headteacher was so strict with us. They would order us to come to the morning reading sessions at a certain time and to meet his standards.” Jieying had a very strict headteacher for the first two years in her junior high school, which created an intense environment on top of the study pressure she experienced.

“I would keep my distance from teachers. I did not want to have too much attention from them. I felt I was scared of them, just did not want to be close to them.”

In her dormitory, the boarding staff there were also new to Jieying.

“You needed to sleep at a certain time.... I wouldn’t call that care for me. They just forced us to go to sleep. I think that’s definitely not care. If I did not meet their standards, I could lose points for that, which was annoying.”

“Some of the girls in our dormitory were very hypocritical. They would pretend not to study, but they would take a torchlight and study in the bathroom at night. They even use a comic book as a cover to disguise their biology textbook underneath. When the exam results came in, they had very high scores.”

“A guy made sarcastic comments to others when he saw them studying: ‘Are you doing homework again? How much work have you done?’ ...I felt very tired of some girls. They ‘read some comic books’ in the review weeks and tried to pry into my review progress. I felt very depressed.”

“In junior high school, it was like ‘a bad apple spoils the bunch’. Some people were really small-minded. Their presence made the whole class feel awful... I just wanted to leave this school as soon as possible.”

Fortunately, Jieying did have one good friend to talk to. *“Perhaps because we were alike, like both independent, my parents did not help me when I was tidying my bed and sheets. She was also very independent. Her parents lived in another city.”*

“We were in the same dormitory, so we were very close... She loved to tell me stories she read from books. She read very fast. She could understand the novels even though she skipped many chapters. I enjoyed the interesting stories without reading them. That was one of my few ways to relax.”

Jieying described herself as an *“insulator”* in her junior high boarding school peer group, where she did not actively engage with her peers. She didn’t notice her deskmate was bullied. *“I was concentrated on the study and innocent of other things.... I was not affected by bullying, and probably because I had good marks...I felt junior high school was depressing. It was good that I got good marks and a very good friend, so it was OK.”*

Senior High School: United, Supportive, Efficient

“You knew my junior high school, I just wanted to leave it soon. My senior high school was like a paradise to me compared to that.”

“There was more pressure of studying in senior high school but it felt like everyone was working hard for the same goal.”

“Our classmates often joked about each other. There was a trend called ‘Heiren’. We gave each other nicknames and teased each other. We loved doing that. I had my nickname, and others had theirs. We called each other’s nicknames. I played this with both girls and boys. It was fun.” Jieying enjoyed her interactions in her peer group, which was full of *“outgoing, innocent and cute people”*.

Her teacher, who played an important role in the class collective, was also supportive.

“I was really grateful for my female headteacher in my senior high school. Sometimes I was tired and did not want to study during the evening self-study time. I would find her in her office and chat with her. She would soothe me with her words and patience.”

“In senior high school, I would actively approach others, and build relationships with people at different levels like my teachers, so I often chat with them. Chatting with teachers was better than chatting with parents because I think they could really understand our pressure.”

The environment in her senior high boarding school was supportive, caring, uniting and fun. She did not cling too much to those relationships.

“When I woke up, my friends probably had finished their morning routine. Then I would tell them to go for breakfast first. ‘You don’t need to wait for me. You can finish breakfast and get to the classroom, then start studying early.’ Otherwise, they would need to waste time waiting for me. That is not what I want in relationships.”

“Holding each other up was very unnecessary, especially when we were in the fast-paced environment. With all the pressure, I thought one should do everything on their own and quickly move to the next thing after finishing. You could waste a lot of time going to the toilets together or going home.”

“I remembered one friend that I played along with. We were very good friends. He told me that once we separated, there was very little chance of seeing each other again. I was young and did not believe it, but I found it right afterwards... I think the beauty of the relationships we built in school should only stay in that period of our lives. We were all good friends at that time, and those memories were precious. We all moved on to different life paths... Sometimes I would feel awkward when my classmates tried to reach out to me. I wonder why we had to reach out to each other actively... There is no need to drag two people together when they are already parted. You might find them completely different, and the good impression is disillusioned. If we do not contact, the good impression will stay as it was.”

Analysis

Living with peers on campus gave Jieying more time with her peers. She spent more time and slept in the same dormitory with her peers. The environment made her close to her peers, but it had different effects on her peer relationships in different groups.

Jieying’s junior high school life was primarily focused on studying. The headteacher was strict about academic performance. The main theme in peer relationships was also around studying. The constant peer interactions in boarding school intensified the focus on studying, thereby amplifying the competitiveness of Jieying’s class. According to L. Zhao and Heyman (2018), students may hide their

efforts because they want to appear more intelligent, win approval from others and make others feel better, which underlines the need to present themselves appropriately in relationships with peers. In boarding schools, the management of self-presentation could be critical due to the frequent contact with peers. This study also suggested that Chinese students tended to hide their efforts for competition-related reasons, such as dissuading others from working as hard, which is most evident in a competitive environment (L. Zhao and Heyman 2018). I think Jieying's experiences demonstrated this tendency. In the competitive environment, her peers focused on the exam results and Jieying's review progress rather than others' feelings.

Living in a boarding school meant Jieying could not escape this environment. Five days a week in the boarding school, she found herself in an atmosphere of competition and hypocrisy. From Jieying's perspective, her good performance could make her a target for many peers, and she was often asked about her progress. The concealment in the boarding school was too complicated and tiring. She also valued genuineness more in her relationships, so she did not comply with this trend. The perceived competitive and concealing environment contradicted her choice to stay genuine, which isolated her from the peer group, leading to her decision to go home every day during her third year.

The relationship dynamics were different in Jieying's peer group during her senior high school years. She not only enjoyed the happiness and love of her peer group but also participated in their activities. "Banter can quickly cross the line from acceptable, inclusionary forms of this behaviour to unacceptable, exclusionary actions which mimic bullying." (Newman, Warburton, and Russell 2022, 11) With the nuanced mutual understandings and exchanges within her peer group, the line of nickname usage gradually became clear and meaningful, revealing the intimacy and playfulness within her peer group. The love and happiness she felt were also amplified by the boarding school environment. As Jieying and her peers lived and studied together on campus, their experiences were strengthened by daily encounters.

Studying became more intense during her senior high school years. Instead of competing unscrupulously, the sense of belonging to this peer group united all the members of Jieying's class, allying against all the upcoming challenges. The alliance

reduced the internal comparison and helped Jieying study within this peer group. As a result, she did not choose to go home daily but stayed at the boarding school for some weekends.

Jieying was grateful for her teachers in both schools, but for different reasons. For her strict teacher in junior high school, she was thankful for the strictness, which *“cultivated good study habits”*. The teacher’s strict emphasis on study reinforced the importance of study, which had been instilled in Jieying by her family and society. Jieying was satisfied with her marks and study habits, which she attributed to her strict teacher; however, she also felt a sense of distance from the same teacher. The teacher delivered instruction through the enactment of an authoritative figure, which was effective for Jieying in terms of her marks. There were very few interactions between Jieying and her teacher, as she *“felt afraid of my (her) teachers”*. Even when she felt sick, she had to *“wrestle with the idea of reporting to the teacher”*. The teacher-student dynamic here reflects the pragmatic side of the teacher’s role in improving academic performance.

As for her teacher in senior high school, her gratitude lay more on the empathy and support she received from the teacher. Jieying felt closer to her teacher there. *“I could establish relationships with people at my teacher’s level.”* She also received support from her peers, but the bond with her teacher felt different, as if her thoughts and feelings were recognised by superior adults. Jieying could not get emotional support from her parents; she *“would rather chat with the teacher, who could understand us (her)”*. The teacher played a unique role in Jieying’s senior high school. The teachers in boarding schools spend more time with the students, and they also serve as complementary adult figures to parents within the boarding school environment (Cui 2016). In Jieying’s narrative, she was supported by her teacher and learnt that she could establish relationships with different people.

Through Jieying’s narrative, both of her teachers from junior and senior high school had deep and close involvement with the students due to the boarding school setting. In the absence of parents, both strict management and caring support were needed and valued by Jieying. However, the limited teachers and staff at the boarding school restricted their time devoted to those students. In Jieying’s case, teachers in

boarding schools could offer support to boarders with limitations and gaps, which were filled by peer relationships at school.

Jieying had different relationships in her boarding school experiences. In her junior high school, Jieying's good friend was her only support at that time. Their activities together were relaxing and intimate. Facing an ingenuine peer group, a distant teacher, and emotionally unavailable parents, this friend was her main source of comfort. Compared to her group of peers in senior high school, her interactions with this friend were simple and straightforward. From a developmental perspective, she might only need a companion who shares interests during the early adolescence period, rather than sophisticated friendships, which involve attempts to understand each other and self-disclosure (Weiner et al. 2012). From a relational perspective, Jieying might not feel secure enough to explore more with her peers in her transition to the boarding school environment.

In her senior high school, Jieying felt comfortable with her peers and teachers. She received considerable support from various individuals. Jieying's friendship was not simply about doing everything together, but also about empathetic responses to each other. Mutual responsiveness and understanding became the themes in her relationship with friends. She also engaged in playful and multilateral activities. The peer group in this school made her feel secure enough to reach out and try new things with her friends. With the time and opportunities to engage with peers in boarding school, Jieying was able to experience more with her friends.

The notion of independence also played a significant role in her friendships. When she started at the boarding school, she sought an independent friend. According to Jieying, independence was the reason that they became good friends. Independence here was mainly used to represent independence from family: Jieying's friend did not need her parents to help her settle in, and her family was not in the same city. Jieying also described her friends in senior high school as independent. The independence here meant more about the independence between friends: Jieying and her friends did not wait for each other for breakfast or the toilets. The gradual change reflected Jieying's process of internalising independence. Jieying's independence helped her deal with the separation from her peers smoothly. She enjoyed their time

together at the school and accepted the loss rationally after the separation. Independence was embedded in moments of choosing friends, daily interactions at the boarding school, and until the end of their relationships.

Summary

Jieying's attendance at boarding school was tied to her process of independence from family. With unmet psychological needs, she started by accepting independence as a fact and gradually internalised it as part of herself in her relationships with family and peers. In this case, the boarding school environment was understood as a place to cultivate her independent character. The support from peers and teachers in her senior high school contrasted with the toxic competitiveness in junior high school, demonstrating the importance of relationships at boarding schools for Jieying.

5.6 Xiujie: Surviving the Confinement

Teacher Relational Portraits

“Military Camp”

Xiujie attended the same boarding school for her junior and senior high. The rules there were stringent. *“It was like military management. We ran every morning at school. Girls 1200 metres and boys 1600. It was healthy for me. I lost some weight and became fit...No snacks allowed, no phone allowed. The teachers were rigorous. Students caught using mobile phones would be punished through a school-wide announcement, and their phones would be confiscated. If a phone were confiscated in the first grade, it would be returned in the third grade after graduation. At that time, it would be unusable, which was very annoying. Smoking, ear piercing, and dying hair would all be strictly punished. We studied hard all day, and we were exhausted. We woke up at 6 am and didn’t sleep again until 11 pm or midnight. It was very tiring for developing children.”*

“The life residential teachers were meaner than other teachers. They were so...They were from the rural area and loved playing with power. It was like, ‘I’ve got some power, and I’m going to make it hard for you. I dare you to talk back to me. You do? I will make you suffer!’ It’s that kind of feeling.”

“There were appraisals for the best dormitory room and competitions between classes. The residential teachers were responsible for assessing the rooms. They were very strict. It would be minus 10 points for a hair on the ground. Thousands of students had meals in the same food hall daily, so each class rotated to get in. If I were late for my class’s queue, our class would be the last to get in. As for the snacks, they were keen on searching for students’ snacks. They would look for snacks and mobile phones under the pillow and inside the quilt. They were delighted to find forbidden stuff and reported the students happily to other teachers. From rural villages, they were completely on the opposite side from us, and there was no common ground.”

Analysis

The boarding schools in Xiujie's narratives had rigorous rules for students. Some rules focused on banning means of pleasure without offering appropriate substitutes for Xiujie. Some rules were unreasonable, which could lead to loss of possessions and lack of sleep. The boarding school failed to consider the compatibility between its settings and all the students, leading to confusion and annoyance for students like Xiujie. She left home and was ready to explore more in her adolescence but felt constrained by the rules. Moreover, those rules were accompanied by serious consequences, especially those related to other classmates. Xiujie's mistake could be magnified, and the whole dormitory or class would have to be punished. This might lead to a disadvantaged position for rule-breaking students in their friendships. Despite the possible effectiveness of these rules in regulating students' behaviours, Xiujie was disgusted by those relational consequences while narrating angrily.

The rules were restrictive enough, but the strict staff who enforced them on students made them more unbearable for Xiujie. In the staff-student interaction, there was no explanation of the rules or room for negotiation. The staff were even happy to search for evidence and report students. She did not feel guidance, empathy, or care from the boarding staff. Instead, she perceived a pure power play between the enforcer and the rule-breaker, where the focus was on the possession and exercise of power. Research has shown that an emphasis on reasoning in disciplinary strategies can lead to prosocial behaviours. In contrast, reliance on power-assertive disciplinary styles, such as commands, can lead to an increase in aggression and hostility in relationships (Weiner et al. 2012). Affected by the frequent use of power, Xiujie showed her aggression and anger towards the staff when she narrated her suffering in the boarding school.

Turning a Blind Eye

“Our headteacher in junior high was good. She was from a good school in our region. She had just moved from an open environment to a closed environment, so she was rather open-minded. We sometimes sneaked in mobile phones, and she turned a blind eye to them. Some teachers were crazy. They called two girls holding hands lesbians, and also didn't allow students to bring coffee beans, no coffee allowed. They didn't

allow students in the 'experimental class'(better in marks) to play with students in the 'normal class'. They were quite mental, but our teacher was normal. I had a good experience in the three years of junior high...Premature love was not allowed. She might know about it or might not. It was ambiguous. Other headteachers would interfere, but not ours. Our headteacher in junior high was on the same side as us."

"We had three different headteachers in senior high. The first one also transferred from elsewhere. She didn't care much about our mobile phones. The second one has also just transferred to our school. We also managed to use our phones. Headteachers from other classes told her, 'Students in your class used phones again.' She was like: 'It doesn't matter.' Our third teacher was the head of our grade. She was very righteous. For example, she would criticise us for passing small paper notes between each other in class, but she would never look at the content. She at least respected our privacy. I always played with my phone in the toilet before the evening study time, so she knew I had my phone. Although it was against the rules in our school, she didn't intervene. The teachers knew that we had huge academic pressure, and they sympathised with us."

Analysis

Apart from the rules at the school level, some headteachers also had their own rules to regulate students. For Xiujie, respect was the fundamental element in interactions. She was angry with those teachers because they restricted students' freedom in social interactions, violated their privacy, and called students names. She felt those "mental" teachers treated students in inhuman ways. Her teachers met her basic need for respect, so they were "normal" teachers. In this comparison between her headteachers and other strict teachers and boarding staff, she felt relieved. The narration depicted an institution with many strict rules and enforcers. Facing the rigorous rules and "enemies", Xiujie's head teachers chose to stand on the students' side and sympathise with the students in the closed boarding school environment. Although the headteachers couldn't fight for her, she found some relief in their relatively relaxed management and understanding, which were crucial for her in an intense and closed environment.

The headteachers' understanding and sympathy helped Xiujie persevere in this boarding school. However, I would argue that the headteachers' different attitudes and implementations of the school rules created discrepancies in understanding the school rules. It may be inhumane to follow the rules strictly, but ignoring and tolerating prohibited behaviours could also erode the fairness and authority of the school. In Xiuejie's case, she learned that her headteachers could ignore some of the rules. For her, the rules were no longer impeccable. Breaking the rules and resisting authority became practical. Therefore, it was natural for her to expect ignorance from her residential teachers. For teachers, striking a balance between strict rules and compassion for students is crucial, rather than simply choosing one side over the other. In the teacher-student relationship, having escaped the rules, students could regard their teachers as open-minded, wise, and intellectual, and even further idealise them through their projections in the teacher-child relationship.

Extra Needs

"I think every teacher cares the most about the students at the top and the bottom. The top students were favoured, especially by our math teacher. She liked the boys who were good at math. They slept in class but could solve the problem quickly when the math teacher asked them. She allowed them to continue sleeping. She liked those boys very much. As for students in the middle range like me, she wouldn't bother. She might ask me to stand as a punishment, but that was it. She didn't care at all. Although she encouraged us to ask her questions in her office, she was always impatient. Then, I didn't go to her office. She was very careless, except for the students she liked and those at the bottom."

"I trusted the teachers at that time, and I actively interacted with them. I loved Chinese literature and showed my Chinese teacher my favourite book. Due to my slight OCD, even a single dog-ear would make me want to buy a whole new book. She didn't take good care of my book at all. They were always in very bad condition. I was very annoyed by that. When I shared the book (Norwegian Wood by Haruki Murakami) I was reading with my senior high teacher, she said it was inappropriate for my age because of the adult content... I was also very interested in The Literary Mind and the

Carving of Dragons. It's a literary criticism book of ancient Chinese. I studied that so hard that I could recite it."

"I started to be interested in philosophy and metaphysics. I became more independent and think about them every day. We learned the law of conservation of energy in physics class. After class, I asked the physics teacher: 'Where does the soul go after people die?' The teacher was like looking at a mental: 'It becomes heat and disperses in the air.' 'It really won't go somewhere? Will the soul stay after death?' After that, the teacher thought I had some problems. When I said hello to her, she ignored me...I tried to build friendships with teachers because I thought I was superior, maybe at the same level as my teachers. My teachers didn't treat me equally. They didn't treat me as a normal adult but just as a child, a student. They didn't treat me as a respectful and capable person. We were people from different worlds. I was quite disappointed in that."

Analysis

The narrative showed Xiujie's need for her teachers at the boarding school. On the closed campus, she was away from her family, and the number of teachers was also limited compared to the number of students. In her interactions with her math teacher, she cared about the teacher's attention, regardless of whether it was for the good students or those who fell behind. Moreover, she also accepted punishment as evidence of attention. I think the care for students at the top and the bottom reflects the limitation of teachers as a profession, which could be acceptable in day schools where students meet parents daily. With extra needs in the boarding school environment, however, the effect of teachers' ignorance on students in the middle, such as Xiujie, is amplified.

Although Xiujie did not receive much attention or care in class, she actively approached teachers with her thoughts related to various subjects. However, the teachers seemed to focus more on the study materials. The teachers were on the students' side regarding the strict rules, who were "*open-minded*" and came from good backgrounds. In contrast, when it came to personal emotional support, they fell short of Xiujie's expectations. Therefore, teachers could not give Xiujie enough attention to

compensate for the lack of relational support in the boarding school and also did not live up to her expectations.

Xiujie also tried to discuss some extracurricular topics with her teacher. To me, those books were challenging for students her age due to their difficulty and adult content. In the narrative, her teacher deemed the book *“inappropriate”*. In her words, she was *“eccentric”* at that stage, which seemed to contribute to her *“superior”* personal image. The superiority, in turn, also promoted her eccentric interest in literature and knowledge. Those two were intertwined in her time at boarding school. In her interactions with teachers, she shared her thoughts with teachers she respected, but she felt she was not treated equally. For Xiujie, she would like to be friends with teachers and share what she thought would be appropriate between friends. The teachers cared more about her development and achievement as a high school student than as an adult. Her need for acknowledgement and recognition was not catered to in the teacher-student relationship, which disappointed her.

Peer Relational Portraits

Swing Between Pleasing and Distancing

“I was a class monitor at that time. In my class, I was responsible for maintaining discipline. I yelled at our classmates: ‘Stop talking!’ ‘It’s time for self-study!’ I would also read out some announcements in my class. I also led the morning English reading sessions in our class. I was not the English class rep, but my English was not bad. I wanted to be in charge and thought highly of myself.”

“When I was in senior high, I craved others’ acceptance. When the girls in my class talked about things normally, I felt they were talking about me. I thought maybe they were making jokes about me. It turned out they weren’t talking about me at all... I cared about others’ thoughts about me very much. If someone invited others to dinner, but I was not invited. I would feel upset. If I didn’t get likes on social media, I would think I did something wrong.”

“I remembered someone shared a family bereavement, and I said: ‘My grandma also died!’ I tried to blend in and finally found a common topic. A girl in that peer group said, ‘Why did you seem so happy about your grandma’s death?’ I was so awkward.”

"I didn't care about others' opinions at that time. I lay on a bench under the trees during the break. I just stayed still and watched the leaves, doing nothing and feeling the breeze. It was very Taoist...I didn't need them, and I felt that I had nothing in common with them. I used to be a very isolated person. I had no interest in others. They talked about popular TV series and sang famous songs together. I was not interested at all, and I didn't care. I was a very nerdy person at that time."

"It was in the third grade in junior high that we had that physical fitness test. There was an 800-meter run, and one of my classmates wanted to give me a hand in the last bit. I pushed her away and said: 'Don't touch me.' It broke her heart. I would refuse others' help. She was nice to me and would like to include me, but I pushed her away."

"In senior high, I had some friends. They could help me, and we fought against teachers and had snacks together, but I think they were not on the same level as me. I was selfish. I never wanted to share with others, like my snacks. I always had my reservations about others...My friend was busy preparing for art exams and didn't usually return to campus. She made the effort to come and see me all the way, but I refused to see her."

Analysis

Xiujie described her two different attitudes towards her peers at boarding school as two *"extreme attitudes towards peers"*: *"pleasing"* and *"distancing"*. The first few narrative portraits show her caring attitudes toward her peers. In peer relationships, she took the role of *"pleasing"* others. J. Lee et al. (2024) argue that in boarding schools, peer relationships were necessary alternatives to safe relationships with adults, and boarders could make desperate efforts to adhere to socially accepted behaviours. In Xiujie's narrative, she took the responsibility of facilitating the study environment in her class and enjoyed her role among her peers. Acceptance from peers was so important to her that she cared deeply about every interaction and was sometimes even paranoid and desperate.

In the second part of the narrative, it appears that Xiujie was immersed in her own world and indifferent to her peers at the boarding school. She became the maverick, *"distancing"* herself from her peers. She needed some personal space to

protect herself from the intense and clumsy interactions. As mentioned in the previous section, Xiujie identified more with her interest in extracurricular materials and her “superior” personal image. She then moved away from the popular topics among her peers and sought friendships with teachers. On the other hand, she did remember the names of popular TV series and songs. When offered help, she refused fiercely by pushing her peer during the running test. Xiujie admitted that she had always wanted her peers’ acceptance, even if she didn’t show it. I think Xiujie still valued and wanted care from her peers, but there was something unbearable for her in peer relationships.

In her narrative, those two attitudes of “pleasing” and “distancing” alternate, which is not a one-off change for Xiujie. She attributed her “weird” attitudes toward peers to her “lack of skills and capacity for communication.” She also stated that the boarding school limited her interactions with others and blocked her access to information. I think this boarding school was not a suitable environment for Xiujie at her age. This setting forced her to accept an environment where boarders faced the departure from home, the ban on mobile devices, and constant contact with peers all at once, where the importance of relationships with peers on campus peaked. The change of attitude demonstrates her attempt to adapt to the new relational environment in the boarding school. She was learning to balance her personal needs and relationships with others, but it was too sudden and enforced strictly on her. Consequently, she had to adopt the swing from one to another in the extremely oppressive environment. As she said in the interview, “*There was no exit or room to breathe.*”

Premature Love

“I fell in love with a boy in junior high. I loved the prose, and he loved art and paintings. I thought the boys who painted were very attractive, and I liked his appearance. We often chatted with each other about art and read art-related newspapers. He shared paintings with me, and I shared my diaries. We also exchanged some thoughts. It’s like we lived in a poetic world. Our relationship was confirmed in the second year of junior high. We were just little children, so we only kissed and hugged, of course, when no teachers were around.”

“When my mom knew about this relationship, she was very angry. She didn’t want me to have this in high school...I didn’t do well in the senior high entrance exam, but my boyfriend was in the same school, so I put up with it...He fell in love with another girl. I couldn’t do anything. I was devastated. I was very upset then, but there’s nothing I could do.”

Analysis

Xiujie’s relationship with her boyfriend was intimate, which was especially important for her as she did not have stable relationships with either peers or teachers at the boarding school. It is also noticeable that her interest in art was shared and recognised by her boyfriend. Therefore, this relationship carried both intimacy and recognition for her in the closed environment. She cherished this relationship, and even her mother could not interfere. It also became her primary motivation to stay in the boarding school. This relationship meant so much to Xiujie that the breakup devastated her. She lost the intimacy, recognition and motivation all at once. *“My attitude (to peers) suddenly shifted to the other extreme, possibly because of the breakup blow.”* As discussed previously, in the oppressive and intense environment, the loss of a crucial relationship meant she needed other relationships. Consequently, she leaned towards the attitude of *“pleasing”*. With frequent peer contact in the closed boarding school environment, Xiujie accepted and adapted to the changes by shifting her attitude towards her peers. This narrative illustrates how Xiujie leveraged the shift in attitudes to protect herself after a devastating breakup. During her time at boarding school, there were more occasions like this. The repeated attempts and failures were too much for her to bear. From her peers’ perspective, they might perceive Xiujie as unstable and unreliable, which could compromise the existing and developing peer relationships.

Balanced Social Interactions

“I couldn’t imagine having my current situation when I was in boarding school. I have many friends from diverse backgrounds. I can initiate conversations with many people and feel confident talking in my accommodation’s big communal space. I have enough empathy to help people with OCD, depression and anxiety, helping them ease their

stress. I live a good life and have the capacity and energy to help others and bring them happiness. I am also a work leader in an organisation that organises some activities for students at our university. I'm living a fulfilling life right now."

Analysis

Instead of struggling between the two extreme attitudes, Xiujie balances her social interactions and has the energy to help others. She stops pleasing others but initiates conversations and cares for others to maintain her relationships with peers. In this process, she also gains a sense of personal fulfilment, which constitutes her identity, so she does not need to isolate herself from the group. I think the freedom and diversity of her current environment make her feel less stressed about peer relationships. The boarding school environment did cause her struggles in her peer relationships, but it also granted her emotional sensitivity to understanding others and the capacity for empathy to help with their troubles. Although Xiujie was not happy with her experience in boarding school, she found her path to a balanced dynamic in her current peer relationships.

Family Relational Portraits

"Not on Their Mind"

"I attended day school when my maternal grandma took care of me. After she passed away, I transferred to boarding school. My parents were very busy. They didn't have time to care for me or make dinner. They thought they didn't have to care about me... They didn't have me in their mind at all. I think my parents were quite absent. They abandoned me and sent me to many weekend classes to fill my days so they could do their own things. They also didn't care about me. Breaking the rules meant nothing to them. As long as I didn't do something severe like smoking, drinking, or fighting with others, they didn't care...When I was home, I usually played with the computer and the dancing mat, just dancing around. Sometimes, my parents took me out for dinner and nothing else. We might go to the park together and hike up a hill. That's it, and sending me to classes, driving me there, basically those."

Analysis

Before boarding school, Xiujie did not receive much time or emotional care from her parents, so sending her to boarding school felt like an embodiment of the perceived abandonment, an extension of the existing abandoning-abandoned parent-child relationship. Within this relational dynamic, she was particularly sensitive to traces of separation and refusal. For her, weekend classes meant less about studying and more about her parents abandoning her and clearing schedules to do their own things. The lack of time and care overshadowed the company and the resources her parents provided during her childhood. Therefore, the existing dynamic in Xiujie's relationship with her parents paved the way for her resistance to boarding school. Additionally, this pattern may also contribute to her sensitivity to peer relationships, where refusal could be perceived as abandonment. She would have to either please or distance herself from her peers.

Recurring Script

"There were few communications. I relied on keeping diaries and reading books to digest my feelings. I loved a boy in junior high. I wrote many love letters and wanted to discuss them with my mom. So, I wrote a letter to my mom about my boyfriend. I asked my classmate to read it to my mom over the phone. My mom was furious about this premature love. She said I couldn't have romantic relationships before senior high. She then started to watch me closely and tightly. I have stopped communicating deeply with them since then... I called my parents for around 5 minutes every evening. There was nothing much (to talk about). It was just fine. Maybe once every two days. It's not very confidential. My roommates were all there to listen. Our conversations were quite general."

"They usually drove me to school on Sunday. I needed to be there around 6-7 pm. We finished an early dinner at 5 pm. Then I took a shower and packed my luggage. On the way, my mom would hold and squeeze my small hand, and my dad would play songs while driving. There were rarely conversations on the way, just quietly listening to the music and holding hands. Upon arrival, my dad would park the car, and my mom would get out with me. She sent me to the school gate, and I waved goodbye. I then walked into the school. I didn't want to go back, and sometimes just cried to my mom:

'I don't want boarding!' 'No way! What are you thinking about?' She wouldn't listen to me.'

Analysis

Those narratives showed Xiujie's relationship with her parents during her stay at the boarding school. Although she was aware of her parents' absence, she tried to communicate with them. This suggests that Xiujie lacked sufficient support from her peers and teachers at school, so she reached out despite the potential refusal. In the first part, Xiujie probably knew her mom would react with disapproval, so she chose to ask her friend to read the letter to her mom. In the parent-child relationship, Xiujie chose to communicate tentatively through a peer. Because of the perceived abandonment, there was testing and probing in the parent-child relationship. The result might be acceptable for Xiujie because she at least had close attention from her mom. However, as she mentioned, Xiujie found it challenging to open up to her parents and only discussed general topics over the phone.

The scene in the second part was repeated weekly for Xiujie and her parents. It seemed quiet but had undercurrents. Xiujie did not want to go back to boarding school and would occasionally speak up, despite the authoritative rejection she would hear from her mom. Her parents offered support by driving, playing music, and holding hands on the way to school, but the bottom line was a clear timeline for their daughter to attend boarding school on a weekly basis. To Xiujie, she received the closest care actions only on her way to abandonment. *"My mom's rational thoughts dominated. She could rest when I was at the boarding school. She thought the school wouldn't hurt me."* In the parent-child relationship, it is evident that her parents still decided where she attended school, even when she received care. The quietness reflected the acknowledgement of this dynamic and the repression of feelings on both sides.

Xiujie could not get enough emotional support in her interactions with her parents. Although she could still be abandoned in a day school environment, the boarding school environment did not help, as it represented the abandonment pattern in the parent-child dynamic. Furthermore, the authority of the boarding school setting also had similarities with her mom, where premature love and protest were not allowed.

Therefore, the boarding school environment here represented a constant reminder of her unpleasant parent-child relationship.

When Absence Turns into Reflection

“It (the relationship with her mom) immediately became better since I started university and went back home every day. The university was close to home, and it was like I went to work and back home every day. My relationship with my mom improved, and we talked more. Then, we became friends, and she reflected a lot. She was like, ‘I was sorry for the past.’ ‘I didn’t give you company.’”

“After I started university, I could take care of myself for lunch, and sometimes I finished dinner before going home. They (her parents) would prepare dinner if it was too late to eat at school. Maybe they also had more time. They were nearly retired when I was in university; they were not on the frontline.”

“I would tell her about the good stuff, like meditation. I also told her that I continued to exercise and checked on their diet. There are more communications now. They would send me some ideas for travelling and I could tell them, like, whether it was a good itinerary.”

Analysis

Xiujie’s interaction with her parents changed after she entered university. In boarding school, she had to attend school and received constraints from staff, but at university, she could take care of herself. As Arnett (2000) argues, emerging adulthood, from the age of 18 to 25, differed from adolescence because individuals started to recognise themselves as adults, were treated like adults by others, and had legal rights. Evidence in the Chinese context also supported the differentiation from adolescence to emerging adulthood, with a focus on recognition and changes in family roles and responsibilities (Nelson and Chen 2007). In her family relationships, Xiujie gained more autonomy due to the recognition of her maturity. Moreover, her opinions were valued by her parents in their daily conversations. The decisions that used to be made by her parents were now open for discussions and suggestions from Xiujie. It seemed that the parents’ ageing also played a part in this changing dynamic, as they were “nearly retired” and “not on the front line”.

The boarding school setting reduced the contact time between Xiujie and her parents, resulting in limited opportunities for her parents to experience or acknowledge the maturing process. The university setting, on the other hand, offered Xiujie a chance to demonstrate her capacity to care for herself, and her parents the opportunity to witness it, which enabled the renegotiation of the child-parent relationship. Their daily interactions sustained and reinforced the recognition of Xiujie's maturity. The reflection and apology from her mother offered further recognition from an adult's perspective, which she had never received from teachers or parents in boarding school.

Summary

For Xiujie, the early experience of parental abandonment foregrounded her sufferings at boarding school, where she found the confining environment and strict rules unbearable. At school, her relationships with staff were marked by tight scrutiny and a lack of empathy. Xiujie was also not accustomed to frequent contact with peers in boarding school, where she adopted the changing attitudes to cope with them. The boarding school environment did not paralyse her, as she established a more balanced approach to social life and renegotiated her relationships with her parents.

5.7 Junxian: Soaring Away

Family Relational Portraits

Between Care and Constrain

“Parenting in my family was strict. If I watched TV for a long time, my mom and grandma would start nagging. They would tell me to stop playing and start studying. They would also do it if they caught me reading casual books. When it was mealtime, they would also call me to eat. If I were alone, I could decide when to play, study, or eat, and for how long. I could even pull an all-nighter if I wanted to.”

“It’s just a tradition to make soup for dinner in my province. When I was home from school every week, my family would make soup for me: chicken soup or nutritious soup. Even now, they will count the time and prepare soup if I go home. It’s very time-consuming because it takes time to pick good ingredients, and it usually takes 6-7 hours to simmer. It’s normal to everyone.”

Analysis

From Junxian’s narrative, it is evident that his family cared for him. However, he was ambivalent about the care. In the interview, he used “*sticky togetherness*” to describe his relationship with his family. I think he perceived the parent-child relationship as too close and wanted independence. Based on the interactions at home, Junxian was disciplined by his mom and grandma. This constant attention surrounded him, which he could not escape from at home. This close attention seemed to derive from his family’s expectations of him. The family’s love and care were conveyed in a controlling way, suffocating Junxian at home. On the other hand, he relied on his family’s help during his childhood, including nutritious food and resources for study and leisure. He respected the family tradition and appreciated his family’s care, but he craved independence. At this stage, he was ready to be psychologically independent, but his material dependence constrained him.

In the parent-child relationship, the power dynamic was evident, where Junxian had to obey his family members. In this unequal relationship, Junxian received little respect and validation of his autonomy and play instincts. Instead, he was exposed to

continuous management and regulation from his family members with the aim of moulding him into an individual who meets the family and social expectations. As Foucault (2000) claimed, the power is not a possession or capacity of individuals, which suggests the relational nature and participation of both parties in the exercise of power. In Junxian's case, the inherent nature of and his dependence on family were the "glue", which "sticks" him to this unescapable power dynamic in his family relationship.

Path to the Free World

"That boarding school was the best school in our city. Since I got accepted to that school, I just started boarding there. I wouldn't choose to board deliberately or refuse a school because it was a boarding school...It was not much different from my previous day school. I felt freer, but my family was concerned about my attending the boarding school. My mom even cried because she was very worried."

"I often wanted to stay at school for weekends, but my family wanted me back. Especially when the exams were coming, some of my classmates stayed on campus. I wanted to do it, but my family wanted me back. I attempted to say that I didn't want to go home. They asked why I didn't want to go back. 'Is something going on?' It seemed that if there's nothing important, I should go home. That was the default option, and only if there's a reason would I not go back. It was relaxed and free at school, and I really wanted to study for the exams. If there were no upcoming exams, I would like to wander around on campus or maybe read some books. There's a big library in our school. I wish I could borrow some books and just read them for the weekend."

"After graduating from the boarding school, I did not contact them that much. They would still express thoughtful care and concern, but they couldn't restrict me anymore. It'd just be some nagging. I still feel a little bit of that ('sticky togetherness'), but it was not that intense. Actually, I try to avoid going home, but I would usually go back during festivals."

Analysis

Although Junxian did not actively choose to attend boarding school and did not initially feel the difference, he enjoyed his free and relaxed time away from home. In

the parent-child relationship, the attempt to stay at school showed his wish to escape and resist the restrictive parenting at home. From the perspective of power dynamics, “where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault 1980, 101). In my understanding, his wish to stay at the boarding school over the weekend could be interpreted as a form of resistance to the unequal dynamic between Junxian and his family. Moreover, this attempt was not just an emotional reaction to the nagging he disliked. His plan for revision and reading showed his capacity to form his own opinion. Although his family’s concern and the implied rule of returning home continued to control Junxian, he got five days a week of relaxation and freedom. I think the boarding school setting offered Junxian and his family a gradual route to his independence from the family. When the interval separation occurred in this relationship, Junxian attempted to create more chances away from home, and his family was also digesting the child’s departure with emotional reactions and less control over him. He had more free time when he was away for his higher education, and his family did not force daily communication on him.

From this narrative, Junxian’s resistance to his family’s nagging was evident. He further explained it as “annoyingly asking me this and that”. From my perspective, Junxian’s style of answering questions seemed relatively brief and defiant (e.g. he said it (boarding school) was not different from day school and said he was freer away from his family). During the interview, I felt that I played the role of “*asking this and that*”, where I initiated more questions than in interviews with others. Therefore, I wonder if his communication style also contributed to the persistent asking and nagging of his family members. In this dynamic, the boarding school environment as a physical mechanism of separation solved the nagging problem experienced by Junxian. He was not resistant to his family that much. However, his pattern of resistance to the nagging or care from others persisted, which was reactivated during the close and detailed interview.

Peer Relational Portraits

Thriving with Peers

“I played ball games and cards or read comic books with my friends. We shared the same comic book in the same dormitory, and roommates were usually allocated to the

same team in ball games during PE class. Noon break was the time to play cards, but we needed to hide from the teachers. We cooperated and competed in games, studies, and daily life. We implicitly cared about each other's marks and rankings. I wouldn't stop discussing homework with classmates for fear of them surpassing me in exams."

"My marks improved a lot in junior high. I ranked about 500th -600th when I entered high school. At the end of the first year, I ranked 300th, 200th in the second and about 100th in the third year. The study material was new and complicated for me. I enjoyed learning new and challenging things.

"In junior high, the class monitor was close to me. It was not because he was the class monitor but because we were like-minded and got along well. We were both very motivated people and got into our city's top senior high school, which was attended by many high-achieving students. He is special to me because we have stayed connected until now. He is pursuing his PhD in the US, which makes him one of the few classmates to choose this path. We mainly talked about academic stuff recently. I am studying computer science, and he's studying physics. Sometimes, he reaches out to me with questions."

Analysis

In boarding school, Junxian had some freedom to distribute his time. He enjoyed leisure as much as study. With peers around, he also learnt to interact with peers in those activities. The competition and cooperation between peers also facilitated his performance at school. As his school achievements began to accumulate, he found fulfilment in his studies. In turn, he tended to befriend people who also cared about studies. Therefore, Junxian's peer relationship and academic achievements promoted each other, which was enabled by living on campus with his peer group. As a result, this positive reinforcement loop also prolonged the continuation of his peer relationship and academic pursuit. Junxian's narratives also illustrate a movement from family-centred relationships to peer-centred relationships, which featured mutual understanding, cooperation and fair competition. Those relationships fostered autonomy and motivation in his personal development.

Throughout Junxian's narrative, he is more actively pursuing and reaching out in his peer relationships than passively receiving and being pushed in his family

relationships. The non-binding and non-restrictive peer relationship provided sufficient support, entertainment, and space to explore his interests in a way that fit his pace at school. J.B. Miller and Stiver (1997) claimed a paradigm shift from the primary emphasis on early relationships with caregivers to the mutuality in empathy, growth, and resonance within all encounters. I believe Junxian's narrative illustrates how the mutuality in his relationships with peers enabled him to thrive and grow during the adolescent stage. I would also argue that this process was accelerated by his frequent contact with peers.

Moreover, the boarding school setting was not free from restrictions for students. There were fixed schedules and rules to follow in Junxian's narrative at school. Comparing the family environment and the school environment, I believe Junxian's acceptance of restrictions at school was influenced by his peer relationships. In the home environment, as the only child, he was the only one who received restrictions from other family members, which put him in a position where he was against the restrictors alone. At school, he was with all his peers, who received the same restrictions as he did. He was not alone, but part of a team with others. In addition, there was little room for negotiation at home, but he could hide from the restrictions with his peers at school. The difference in relationship dynamics changed Junxian's perception of restrictions, which resulted in his acceptance of those at the boarding school

Navigating Different Roles in Peer Group

"Two other students seemed to admire me for some reason. Maybe I appeared to be a bit superior, like a reclusive master or some kind of otherworldly sage. People naturally form groups and hierarchies. Although I didn't hold any official positions in my class, everyone seemed to think I belonged to the higher-level group, more like the management circle. Perhaps partly because I was working in the student union at the time. There were two student union representatives from each class, and I was one of them. So, even though I didn't hold any class officer positions, people usually consulted me about event organising, like arranging cleaning after school sports day."

"I joined the school union to do more things actively. In the student union, I met many people and had the opportunity to participate in various activities, including welcoming

visiting students and visiting other schools in a different area. I was working in the discipline department at the student union. I did the school patrol with others, but there wasn't much to check. Everyone was well-behaved because my school was quite good. The patrol was more of a formality, but the role in the student union granted me a special status."

"It (the reason for having two admirers) could also be my study. Undoubtedly, I was the most actively engaged student in my class. I also joined my physics teacher in attending a competition in another province. The allocation of classes depended on the ranking. I was around 70th when I entered senior high, and I got into the first 50 afterwards. So, I was able to stay in my class. But there were students in my class who were better than I was. I still can't understand why they admired me."

Analysis

Junxian's attempt to find reasons for his admirers revealed different parts of himself in his relationships with others at his boarding school. His various roles and responsibilities at school showed his enthusiasm for school life. Throughout his detailed and comprehensive narrative, it is evident that he actively engaged with his school life. He felt understood, trusted, respected, and even admired by his peers, which he could not get from his family relationships.

In this narrative, Junxian's role as a representative in the school union played a significant role in his interactions with peers. In Chinese schools, the school or class cadres are students who hold specific positions and are responsible for certain management tasks (Y. Shen 2014). "Every class has similar posts, including the post of class monitor, and commissaries respectively in charge of study, organisation, publicity, sports, entertainment, discipline and health." (Gu, Ma, and Teng 2017, 53) Junxian's post was at the school level, and he oversaw discipline, which granted him the power to manage other students. Although he did not think his post mattered much at school, his presence symbolised the school's discipline to other students. In addition, as a school cadre, he also had access to opportunities and information, which were rare resources on campus.

On the other hand, the educative function of the cadre system helped students learn in practical ways, benefiting their intellectual and psychological development

(Sun 2013). In Junxian's case, the cadre experience offered him various opportunities for self-development in organising, communicating, managing, and cooperating. In his peer group, he stood out with his capability and confidence in accomplishing various tasks. I think the boarding school environment amplifies the effects of the cadre role. Due to the extensive time at school, cadres in boarding schools, like Junxian, have more time to develop themselves, and their power lasts longer during school.

According to Junxian's narrative, the power dynamic between him and his peers was different from that between him and his family. After experiencing the strict discipline imposed on him at home, he refrained from abusing his power. Instead, he was willing to do extra work and help his class with errands. In his relationship with peers, there were no complaints or fierce resistance, and he received respect and admiration.

Distance to Intimacy

"We used to chat at night. Those late-night chats were definitely one of the highlights of campus life. I secretly loved a girl for four years, from junior to senior high school. It was found out by one of my roommates. One night, he said in a very certain tone that I liked that girl. I reacted so strongly at the time that everyone eventually found out. After knowing this, the boys in my class often fussed over me and this girl. She wasn't happy about it, and our relationship went sour...I struggle with intimate relationships. I think I was a bit avoidant in intimate relationships. I also tried expressing my feelings to a girl during university, but was rejected. I was not sure if it was because of me."

Analysis

Hearing the firm speculation from his roommate, Junxian's strong reaction showed his genuine and profound feelings for this girl. However, the secret love was prematurely ruined by his roommates before he even took any steps. The peer group offered opportunities to build peer relationships but also implied the public nature of boarding school life. The shared rooms, minimal privacy and intense peer presence limited safe spaces for emotional risk-taking for Junxian. The experiences of unsuccessful confessions of love impacted Junxian's confidence in intimate relationships. On the other hand, it seemed to me that he might not be ready to build

intimate relationships based on his interactions with others. In his relationships with his family, he was ambivalent about the “airtight” care he received and subsequently developed a resistance to proximity with others. His relationships with peers and teachers primarily focused on academic achievement and social interactions in the boarding school, where he could easily avoid close and intimate contact with others. In my opinion, the boarding school environment did not necessarily cause his failures in intimate relationships, but it did, to some extent, contribute to his avoidant coping.

Summary

Junxian’s narratives illustrate how the boarding school environment served as a path to freedom amid tensions between his desire for independence and his family’s strict discipline. At the boarding school, he enjoyed acquiring new knowledge, playing with his peers, and managing issues for his class and school. Contrasting the unequal power dynamic at home, his relationships with peers were marked by mutual respect and shared academic goals, whereas he may not have had the opportunity to explore proximity with others. During his stay at boarding school, the various roles he took on also facilitated the development of his socialising skills and sense of responsibility.

Chapter 6 Discussion

6.1 Chinese Boarding School Experience

As demonstrated in the literature review, boarding school is often treated as a single, integrated variable to gain generalised knowledge in research. With the narratives that I co-created with participants, I intend to demonstrate how boarders perceive, make sense of and engage with their Chinese boarding school experiences in various aspects, situated within the social, cultural, and historical contexts. This part also serves as the premise for further discussion in boarders' relationships.

6.1.1 Ordinariness

According to the Chinese Ministry of Education, around 28% of students aged 6 to 18 attend boarding schools (2022), making boarding education a common experience for many families across both rural and urban areas. Rather than being seen as exceptional or elite (Laughton, Paech-Ujejski, and Patterson 2021), attending a boarding school in China is often perceived as an ordinary path, shaped by practical considerations such as school quality, geography, and educational demands. This structural normality was evident in the participants' narratives. Many shared that their cousins, friends, or classmates had attended different boarding schools, and some, like Yanqi, even noted that all senior high schools in their cities were boarding schools. As a result, participants often did not feel a sense of privilege or difference associated with boarding.

Beyond this structural aspect, the ordinariness also manifested in participants' lived experiences. This ordinariness resonates with Henri Lefebvre's critique of everyday life, which challenges the assumption that the everyday is trivial or unimportant. Lefebvre (2014) advocates that the science of mankind should move from the glamorous and the false depth to the richness and essence of everyday life. Xiaofan described her experience as marked by "*normal transitions and normal relationships*", suggesting a smooth adaptation to the environment. Yanqi likewise remarked that the main difference between her day and boarding school experiences was the academic pressure, not the boarding arrangement itself. Beneath this surface-

level normality, however, students were actively drawing on emotional and relational resources to navigate new environments and social dynamics.

In sum, the ordinariness in Chinese boarding school experiences is both structural and experiential. Boarding schools are not reserved for a privileged few but are designed to meet the educational needs of a broad and diverse population. At the same time, it is within the fabric of everyday life that boarders navigate their school environment and make sense of their experiences, which happens through the seemingly mundane aspects of daily routines, interpersonal relationships, and the gradual process of adaptation.

6.1.2 Rules and Rituals

All participants mentioned fixed and tight schedules for study, activities, meals and sleep at boarding schools. Most boarding schools operated on a weekly schedule, so boarders met their families over the weekend with relatively relaxed schedules, with some planned extracurricular classes and casual activities. Some rituals were established based on the patterned weekly shifts between home and boarding schools, such as weekly check-ins with families and peers, a good meal upon returning home, and packing for either boarding school or home, to facilitate the transitions between these environments.

- Rules

The regulations of time and arrangements of space constitute the basic characteristics of boarders' school life, framing the orderly lives of boarders (Pang 2022). This feature of boarding schools could help cultivate good study habits for Jieying and Yanqi. With the point system mentioned by Xiaofan and Xiujie, the rules further regulated the boarders' behaviours and tied them with the collectives they were in. As the keeper of rules at school, Junxian observed that his peers followed the rules well without needing enforcement. For Xiujie, the rules felt restrictive and inhumane. The rules, regulations, and construction of schools are full of traces of discipline (Foucault 2019). In boarding schools, discipline is more prevalent in different aspects of boarders' lives. The top-down implementation and exercise of rules intrinsically reveal the power dynamic within boarding schools as confined institutions during the weekdays. The institutional discipline is exercised in the staff-student relationships,

peer relationships through the cadre system, and facilitated by parents through their participation, which reflects a systematic obedience to the rules at boarding schools. In particular, the restrictive rules and regulations, throughout the narratives, made the flexible implementation and the allowance for change significant for boarders. Anyang narrated her happiness when her primary school teachers took her off campus, and her high school teachers granted her special treatment, in contrast to her upset when she was not taken out for a bath by her *“rule-following”* parents, unlike other boarders’ parents. In Xiujie’s narrative, the contrast between the *“uneducated and strict”* residential staff and the *“open-minded and respectful”* teachers intensified the tension regarding restrictions. Boarders’ reaction to the exception or temporary exemption from the rules demonstrated the unmet need under the enforcement of those rules. As mentioned before, the rules at boarding schools are helpful in establishing orderly lifestyles and study environments. Appropriate implementation and balanced flexibility are crucial for boarders to accept them.

- Rituals

The routines and rituals established in response to the boarding school settings by boarders and their families are mundane, relational, and emotionally charged. Conversations with meal partners, the enjoyment of snacks during breaks, and interactions with students from other grades were mentioned across the participants’ narratives, constituting engagement with peers. Those ordinary, subtle, and informal activities cultivated a subculture that runs parallel to the official order of the school, with a bottom-up feature. According to D. Miller (2008, 521), “the order of things in time and space reinforces their basic beliefs about the natural order of the world. In this way everyday ritual is also an aesthetic, something which gives order, balance and harmony to the world people live in.” From this perspective, the rituals established by boarders can help them find balance and harmony in the boarding school lives through the enactment of everyday practice. Between boarders and their families, the journey between home and school was mentioned the most. The details of packing, welcoming meals, taking different forms of transportation, precise timing and interactions with parents imply the routine but emotional weekly separation and reunion. It is through those moments of transitioning between places and relationships, embracing and relinquishing possessions and affections, that the boarders gradually

navigate and make sense of the rhythms of separation and reunion. The trajectory of changing journeys between home and school in Jieying's family illustrated the negotiation of family relationships and independence. Anyang's request for the family company on her journey to school demonstrated her active assertion when she felt a lack of care from her family. In relationships, those changes in rituals reflect the process of weighing and configuring relational dynamics, which demonstrates boarders' capacity and initiative in relating to others.

The rules and rituals constitute the scaffolding of boarding school culture, shaping students' sense of time, space, and relationality. The internalised rhythms of boarding school lives fostered structure in academic study and also mediated the emotional and relational lives of boarders by creating both constraints and spaces of intimacy in their relationships with family, peers and staff. The rules and rituals, together, demonstrate the important role of both institutional structure and boarders' agency in boarding life. In addition, these mundane and routine experiences of school, home, and in-between, when combined, provide a comprehensive picture of Chinese boarding schools, which are often fragmented and overlooked in studies of boarding schools.

6.1.3 Study Oriented

Chinese boarding schools represent a concentrated and reinforced form of study institutions. As the primary purpose of schools, all participants mentioned the study topic. Through the reduced commuting time and concentrated self-study sessions facilitated by staff, boarders perceived their boarding schools as study-oriented. Boarders study, eat, play and sleep on the boarding school campus, which saves time and emphasises efficiency. Yanqi's understanding and perception of boarding school as a corporate-like institution for study demonstrated the absolute centrality of academic achievement in boarding school, where schedules, social activities, and relationships were all built to serve the pursuit of academic performance.

The narratives also showed that the pursuit of academic achievements is deeply rooted in boarders in various aspects. For example, Junxian enjoyed acquiring knowledge and befriended peers who shared similar pursuits in their studies. Yanqi's peer in senior high school was like a study benchmark for her. To extend the study

time, Jieying's peers even studied with torches in their quilts or in the toilets at night. From a relational perspective, Anyang and Xiujie's narrative demonstrated the uneven distribution of attention to students whose performance was at the top and bottom. Jieying could use her good performance in her studies as a form of protection from peer bullying. I believe that the boarding school embodies the pursuit of educational success, reflecting the emphasis on academic performance that is deeply ingrained in the social environment in China (Gu, Ma, and Teng 2017). Policy-wise, the focus on academic education was marked as one of the main goals proposed in the educational plans by the Chinese government in the past two decades to empower talent development and innovation-driven growth in the economic and social development (Feng, Wang, and Liu 2024).

As a result, the prevalence of boarding schools in some regions is a social and political construct of an efficiency-oriented and result-oriented context. As many regarded the quality of education as the main reason for attending boarding schools, boarders and their families decided to attend boarding schools based on the enrolment scores, exam outcomes and reputations spread by word of mouth. Instead of receiving the impact of Chinese boarding schools, the study-oriented families choose boarding schools, which, in turn, reinforces the focus on study and extends study time.

6.1.4 Social Development

From a developmental perspective, the school can be seen as a context for both academic and social development, where students not only acquire academic knowledge but also engage in socialisation processes that bridge their family and society (Battistich 2010). Chinese boarding schools, as illustrated in this study, serve this dual purpose by providing a platform for students' academic and social development. While academic development is formally structured within the curriculum, social development often occurs within the "hidden curriculum," which includes the tacit knowledge conveyed through the normative structures, organisational processes, and interpersonal relationships that shape the school environment (Battistich 2010, 249).

Drawing on the narratives of Chinese boarders, this study shows how they engage in various social organisations and processes. Boarders experienced

structures in terms of class, grade cohort and school as different levels of collective units and different dormitory rooms and student societies, which are parallel to the academic structure of the school. They also engaged with the organisational processes as participants, organisers, and facilitators in daily encounters and occasional events. The boarders were also immersed in interpersonal relationships with peers and staff. In this process, boarders developed social skills which they found useful during and after their stay at boarding schools.

As Battistich (2010, 248) notes, “one very important function of schooling is to effectively communicate to each generation the fundamental principles and values upon which the society is based.” In this sense, I argue that Chinese boarding schools effectively serve the educational needs of socialisation by enacting the fundamental principles and values in China. Additionally, the settings of boarding schools also address the impact of the one-child policy, the collective roots, and the left-behind situation on boarders and their families in contemporary Chinese society. However, the social development of boarders in these schools is not without challenges. Strict rules, physical separation from family, and insufficient emotional support can make the boarding experience particularly difficult, especially for those with previous trauma or relational issues. These challenges, as revealed in the narratives, sometimes hinder the smooth social development of the boarders, making the boarding school experience both a site of growth and of significant struggle.

6.1.5 Resilience: Mask of Suffering or Development through Challenge

Boarders, like students in other schools, encounter difficulties and challenges during their school years. In the narratives presented in this study, participants experienced various difficulties in their interpersonal relationships, academic performance. In order to solve those issues or mitigate the impact, boarders reached out for support and also employed mechanisms to protect themselves. Duffell and Basset (2016) argue that these are survival strategies that children are forced to adopt in the hostile boarding environment, with the experience of loss of love when they could not rely on their parents, which leads to strategic survival personalities. Throughout the narratives of Chinese boarders, they received support from peers and teachers and did not regard boarding schools as a completely hostile environment,

which was far from the narratives of surviving. However, boarders like Hongying and Xiujie did experience trauma and distress prior to their boarding. In the boarding school environment, they faced the continuous effect of their trauma, which interacted and was combined with distinctive trauma caused by the settings of boarding schools. Facing extreme difficulties, Hongying and Xiujie adopted psychological defences to mitigate the impact of those difficulties when necessary. From a psychodynamic perspective, “the individual needs defences to remain intact as a person. Without them, he will be unable to organize his personality and will experience disintegration and annihilation.” (McLoughlin 2008, 112) For them, the employment of defences was temporary, and without professional help, they were able to reconnect with family and establish connections with friends, which was often highlighted in the stage of change after the stage of recognition and acceptance of the strategic survival personalities in successful therapeutic work with boarding school survivors (Duffell and Basset 2016). Hence, the formation of strategic survival personalities did not apply to Chinese boarders.

I argue that the experiences of difficulties are more aligned with the resilience model proposed by Fergus and Zimmerman (2005), who focused on the assets and resources that enable adolescents to overcome the negative effects of risk exposure. In Chinese boarding schools, difficulties often arise alongside potential compensatory and protective support from teachers and peers in the collective environment. In the challenge model of resilience, adolescents are exposed to moderate levels of risk and learn how to overcome it by practising skills and employing resources (Fergus and Zimmerman 2005). In the narratives, there are many occasions when boarders actively and gradually tried to solve issues and seek help. Especially in the Chinese context, where only children encounter few difficulties at home. The moderate challenges of interpersonal conflicts could facilitate the development of socialisation when the boarders are independent from their family. Following the resilience model, Gao et al. (2021) extend the resilience theory to boarders in China by demonstrating that active coping and peer support can be promotive factors in protecting adolescents from negative development. Wu and Bian (2020)’s study also indicated that resilience was an important psychological capital, which entails resilient cognition in believing setbacks are temporary and identifying the source of support from self, classmates,

roommates, parents and teachers, as well as resilient behaviors of the capacity of emotional regulation, psychological recovery and actions of seeking help.

Nevertheless, resilience as a process depends on the specific risk and available support. When boarders, particularly younger children or those facing sustained or severe trauma, encounter overwhelming risk without adequate protective resources, these difficulties may exceed what can be transformed into resilience. It is therefore vital to acknowledge that trauma and resilience are both limited to the specific contexts of boarders, but they are not mutually exclusive frameworks, which can co-exist within a life narrative, sometimes sequentially, sometimes simultaneously.

6.2 Family Relationship

In the narratives presented in this project, the separation does not make all boarders feel entirely cut off from their families suggested by Schaverien (2015), Duffell and Basset (2016). Instead, attending boarding school represents a step into independence from close contact with family members. The narratives collected in this research suggest that boarders and their parents were able to maintain psychological bonds despite being physically separated. Specifically, all participants mentioned the setting of regular separation from family, which changed their family interactions. However, the separation was perceived and accepted differently. For Jieying, Anyang and Xiujie, the separation affected their emotional bond with their family, which they had to accept and adapt to. Hongying and Junxian, on the other hand, enjoyed the separation from their family due to their existing unsatisfactory relationships. The boarding school environment served as a place to hide from their family. For Xiaofan and Yanqi, the separation had little impact on their family relationships. They focused more on other aspects of their lives, and family relationships were less important to them. In the following section, I elaborate on the emotional bond perceived by the ex-boarders and how their families maintained it through the lens of family relational dynamics within the Chinese context.

6.2.1 Key Elements to Sustain Family Bond

- **Mutual Narrative**

To acknowledge and understand the change in family interactions due to boarding school settings, boarders and their families used two main narratives to keep their understanding in sync. As the main theme in their school life, most participants mentioned study in their interviews. In Xiaofan, Anyang, Yanqi, and Junxian's families, the boarding school was chosen because of the better quality of education. Boarders studied hard day and night at school, and their parents also devoted time and effort to facilitate their studies by driving them to school, sending nutritious food, and paying for extracurricular classes. With the mutual study narrative held by the whole family, boarding school became a sensible choice. The tight schedule, convenience of living on campus, and separation from family made sense to boarders, who did not understand them as difficulties but as means to reach the goal in the mutual narrative.

Another narrative for families is independence. Especially in Jieying's narrative, independence was valued by her family and internalised by herself. The independence included the capacity to do things herself and emotional independence from family. To learn the skills and transition into independence, the boarding school environment is an appropriate place to start this process before the long-term separation in the university period. As a result, Xiaofan mentioned that her smooth transition into university life contrasted with that of students who struggled with separation at her university.

In Laughton, Paech-Ujejski, and Patterson (2021)'s book, the ex-boarders were also told narratives by their families, which did not help them adapt to the boarding school environment. I think there were several possible reasons. First, there was a mismatch between the story and reality. Those boarders were often told it was a privilege to attend boarding school, and their families did pay a considerable sum for it. However, they experienced outdated facilities and shabby living conditions. In China, most boarding schools are public schools. The narrative told to the participants matched their experience of a place to study and to learn to be independent. Secondly, the engagement of parents played an important role in supporting the narrative. Almost all participants mentioned their parents asked how they were in the boarding schools when they met on Friday. Although perceived differently, parents acknowledged the

boarders' independent week and conveyed their concerns to boarders' school lives. The boarders did not carry those goals alone. However, boarders in the British context reported that "their parents did not seem curious about what it was like at boarding school."(Duffell and Basset 2016, 36) Lastly, these narratives align with the participants' developmental phase. In this research, most participants entered boarding schools from junior high school (ages 12-13). Intrapsychic separation from the parent is a hallmark of the adolescent period (Weiner et al. 2012). The weekly separation provided a temporary space away from home, allowing participants to explore separation from their parents. Therefore, the boarding school environment appeared to be readily accepted and had little impact on the boarders.

- **Parental Effort**

In these narratives, parents showed their care in different ways. Many boarders mentioned food in their narratives about family. Their parents took them out to have their favourite food. Xiaofan and Junxian mentioned that their family selected fresh ingredients from the market and prepared nutritious meals at home. Jieying's mother cooked soup and sent it to school to ensure she had enough nutrition. They also had access to snacks they liked at home and even took some back to campus, where food was mainly prepared in a standardised way with fewer snack choices. Besides, boarders also mentioned that they could watch TV, play video games, and enjoy outdoor activities. Yanqi could immerse herself in TV series. Xiujie could spend hours on her dancing mat. In contrast, boarding school schedules were fixed and primarily designed to accommodate study plans. Boarders managed their daily living at boarding schools independently, but they relied on their parents' help to pack on Sundays. Apart from the usual check-in, Xiaofan and Yanqi also mentioned they talked to their parents about their peers and exams.

The existing research focuses on boarders' experiences at boarding schools, yet very little material addresses their lives at home. Investigating this period is crucial as it can reveal in-person family interactions rather than just the fantasised relationships when the child is separated from their family, especially in the weekly setting in China. In the narratives in this project, love and care are evident through the interactions between boarders and their parents. In the interviews, participants seemed to regard the material and emotional support they received from their families

as commonplace. I believe two main reasons led to this family interaction. The participants were born during the one-child policy in China. Five of them were the only child in their families. Like other only children in China, they did not share their parents' care or love with siblings. For them, it was natural to receive parental support. Furthermore, the absence of parents on weekdays was viewed negatively. The boarders then perceived the care and love provided on weekends as compensation in the parent-child relationship. Combining these two reasons, Chinese boarding students were supposed to receive meticulous care at home, but instead, they were sent to boarding schools, which reduced their contact with their families. As a result, they naturally felt they should receive compensation from their families on the weekend. I speculate that parents also thought about compensating the boarders on the weekend, but research needs to be done on parents' perspectives.

- **Boarder as an Active Agent**

In the existing narratives presented in the research field of boarding schools, boarders' suffering from separation is miserable, and boarders cannot speak about or gather their thoughts about their loss of parental affection (Duffell and Basset 2016). The narratives in this project, on the other hand, showed direct communication between children and parents: Anyang directly requested care and time when she needed more from her family. Junxian also asked for more time at boarding school. Although some family issues could not be resolved during their boarding school years, continuous communication helped Hongying and Xiujie sustain and gradually improve their family interactions.

Importantly, many boarders did experience moments of feeling abandoned, lonely, or distant from their parents. These feelings were real and painful, and formed part of how they made sense of their boarding school experience. Yet, alongside this sense of loss, participants also demonstrated active efforts to adapt. Many participants maintained contact with their parents via phone calls. They conducted routine check-ins and requested assistance as needed. Anyang also used the Internet through mobile phones to keep up with family news. When the boarders could not contact their parents, they did not drown in sorrow or desperation but instead built interpersonal connections with peers and teachers in class and through various activities. Those cases reflect that "adolescents are not passive targets of environmental influences;

rather, they *select* their developmental environments and future life paths” (Lerner and Steinberg 2004).

Thus, rather than being purely victims of separation, boarders’ narratives also reveal their agency. Some children felt deeply hurt or even abandoned by their families, yet they simultaneously worked to make sense of this separation, build new bonds within the boarding school, and, in some cases, matured and became more independent. In this sense, the separation in boarding school settings does not uniformly determine boarders’ well-being, as different students experienced, understood, and responded to the same environment in diverse ways.

6.2.2 Family Relational Issues

The narratives reveal complex issues in boarders’ family relationships, which have accumulated over a long period of time. I illustrate different issues and examine the role of attending boarding school in family dynamics.

- **Parenting**

In the narratives, some boarders expressed difficulties with their parents’ parenting at home. Many reported that their parents did not meet their emotional needs. Jieying, for example, received practical support from her parents, but she also wanted emotional support. She attributed this to the lack of “*understanding of feelings in her parents’ generation*”. In Hongying’s case, she experienced extreme denial and strict criticism in her family relationships. These family interactions are consistent with the parenting styles of Chinese parents, emphasising “rational thinking and strict requirements.” (L. Wang and Fu 2005, 302) They further argue that the appropriate use of this kind of parenting would benefit the development of children because of its base in Chinese culture. The findings of this research show that students experienced this kind of parenting, but they found it unhelpful in their limited time with their parents.

I infer that attending boarding school may change boarders’ perceptions of parenting styles since none noted a change in the parenting they received. In Jieying’s case, she spent more time with adults, such as her teachers, who could provide emotional support when she requested it. Furthermore, separation might indicate that the boarders required more support from their parents rather than rational thinking during their limited contact time. Therefore, the findings supported the idea that

inappropriate parenting could affect boarders, which was indirectly affected by boarding.

- **Problems Before Boarding**

Many family issues were formed and accumulated over time. Anyang's parents left her at home to pursue work opportunities in the urban area. As a left-behind child, she experienced many years of separation from her parents, after which she continued to experience frequent changes in parental arrangements at home. Xiujie was reared by her grandma before being sent to boarding school. She later understood boarding schools and weekend extracurricular classes as a form of parental abandonment. These narratives supported J. Lee et al. (2024, 65)'s finding that "some boarders were already impaired prior to attending boarding school." However, the impairment was not due to the "family tradition of boarding" in the UK, but rather because they were left behind or abandoned by their parents in early childhood. In China, scholars believed that building boarding schools was a good solution for the left-behind children, where they could learn to be independent and sociable (Shutao Wang and Mao 2015). Anyang and Xiujie's case suggested that early abandonment could be retriggered at their boarding schools. Therefore, I believe that boarding school environment could affect children who have experienced early abandonment.

- **"Safe Haven"**

As Schaverien (2015, 4) mentions, there are also people "saved by boarding school from neglectful, intolerably chaotic or abusive family situations." In Junxian's case, he also used the boarding school environment as a haven away from the "*sticky togetherness*" in his family when he was ready to depart from his tight family relationships. It is complicated in Hongying's narrative as she experienced abuse in both family and school. I believe that the genuine friendship, admiration and achievements she received at school allowed her to see more possibilities compared to the abuse and distrust from her parents. The temporary separation gave them space from the unwanted interactions with their family members. This space was valuable for them to survive parental abuse and to focus more on achievements.

From the perspective of family relationships, however, the boarding school setting did not resolve the issues in their relationships. Hongying's relationship with

her parents remained unchanged until her accident, and Junxian continued to try to “*avoid going home*”. The continued narratives suggest that the boarding school environment can only provide a temporary buffer from unbearable family situations, while the family relational issues remain unresolved. Furthermore, this escape could change family interaction, where “independence and freedom had become more deeply valued than parental connection” (Hayes et al. 2023, 136), and could also contribute to a change in relationships with others.

6.3 Peer Relationship

As noted in the literature review, research on boarding schools primarily focuses on the parent-child relationship (James 2023). However, boarders spent significantly more time with their peers during term time. When participants were given time during the interview, they also shared more about their relationships with peers. Drawing from these rich narratives, I illustrate the peer relationships among boarders through several themes in Chinese boarding schools.

6.3.1 Study: Competitiveness and Collaboration

As one of the main reasons for attending boarding schools, study is an important part of boarders’ lives on campus. Boarders spent more time interacting with peers, including study and other activities. In a quantitative comparison of boarders’ and non-boarders’ mathematics performance, Z. Xu (2019) argues that fierce competitiveness could lead to academic anxiety in boarders, resulting in poor mathematics performance. From the narratives in this research, Jieying mentioned toxic competitiveness, including hiding efforts, sarcastic rivalry and excessive overtime study. As a result, she felt depressed and switched to non-boarding. In Junxian’s narrative, on the other hand, the competitiveness seemed to motivate his study. He and his peers implicitly cared about each other’s marks, which did not stop them from collaborating for fear of being surpassed.

Competitiveness was common in boarding schools because of the frequent contact among peers. However, I argue that competitiveness does not necessarily lead to a positive or negative result in academic performance. Instead, the boarders’ perception of competitiveness is the key to determining their attitude and feelings

about academic performance in their peer group. Boarders have their existing individual understanding of competitiveness. However, I believe the teachers and the settings in boarding schools play significant roles in shaping this perception, which I elaborate on in the staff section with narratives.

An interesting intersection between competitiveness and collectivism in China is embodied in the form of hiding efforts. As Jieying mentioned, she experienced the hiding efforts in her peer group. Although it was mainly due to academic reasons in her case, L. Zhao and Heyman (2018) claim that hiding efforts could also stem from the need to sustain peer relationships by making others feel better. From a collective perspective, the competitiveness could also be directed to the match between different class collectives. In this way, the boarders focused on helping their classmates in their class and competing with another class. I expand on the role of the class collective in boarding school in the following sections.

Apart from competitiveness, collaboration is also evident in the narratives. The entrance exams serve as mutual challenges for all students in the same class or school. When they face them together, students become allies in the same battle. Many participants mentioned they made friends based on attitudes and performance in the study. Junxian, for example, befriended the class monitor because they were “motivated and high achieving”. They helped each other with study in boarding school, and continued to discuss academic content during their PhD. Yanqi’s peer was her benchmark in the senior high school. Her friend encouraged her, answered her questions in study, and they exchanged exam tips. Although peer collaborations also exist in day schools, the convenience and availability of peer connections at boarding schools promote and cement these collaborations.

6.3.2 Friendship: Ordinary Relationship

Every participant narrated the companionship of peers as a significant part of their life in boarding school. They formed friendships based on shared interests or hobbies, recognised common traits or attractions in one another, or were assigned as deskmates, roommates, or classmates. In the same environment and with the same role as students, they followed the same daily routine together: studying, eating three meals, resting, and repeating it all over again. Those friendships could be ordinary,

mundane and uneventful, but the boarders interacted most with their peers. Brownlie (2014, 2) argues that in sociology, there was “insufficient attention to the ordinary relationships in which our emotional lives are embedded”. In the research field of boarding schools, many researchers focus on traumatic events but overlook everyday friendships. Chatting during the meal, sharing food and snacks, running together for the ferry, etc. I believe that this ordinary peer relationship is what Brownlie (2014, 131) called “being there”. It is the countless mundane days spent together that forged simple yet supportive friendships. I discuss the features of “being there” with the narratives of boarding schools.

First, reachability is apparent among boarding peers, who follow the daily school schedule for five consecutive days. Reachability with peers is particularly important because of the limited phone contact with family on weekdays. Yanqi’s narrative shows that the close reachability among boarders allows different activities to happen in the dormitories. To stay close to their friends, Hongying and Anyang actively requested to change their dormitory rooms.

Secondly, “being there” involves the shared experience of episodes or lives with the underlying understanding of feelings or experiences. The insider knowledge and nuanced details about how to catch the first ferry after class (Xiaofan), how to hide from teachers when playing cards during noon break (Junxian), how jokes and teasing are just banter among friends (Jieying) won’t need to be explained. In contrast, without the shared experience at boarding school, communication with family was often perceived as lacking empathy.

The third dimension is the sense of being alongside, which is comprised of acknowledgement, interactions and presence rather than explicit verbal or practical actions. In the context of boarding schools, the lengthy time spent together among peers enables them to be alongside each other. As Anyang mentioned, she would keep in contact with others to find out if she felt comfortable with them, which suggested a subtlety in the process of “being there”. For Jieying, her friend loved to tell stories, and she enjoyed listening to her, where she found comfort and relaxation. I also believe this kind of unintentional and subtle companionship is particularly crucial for children as they learn to communicate with others.

The fourth one is practical help. We could see traces of practical help, such as help with study mentioned in the last section, financial support between friends in Hongying and Anyang's narratives. However, I would argue that the act of seeking help was constrained by the highly valued independence in boarding schools. Jieying, for instance, internalised independence in the process of separation from her parents and adopted it as a standard when choosing friends. However, this reluctance to help did not hinder Jieying and other participants from making supportive friends at boarding schools. Wu and Bian (2020)'s research about boarders' psychological capital also suggested that helping others was deeply rooted in the boarders' minds, but they dealt with their own practical difficulties independently. It might be an internalised quality for boarders in their interpersonal relationships to offer help but not to ask for help.

6.3.3 Little Emperors in the Collective Groups

The Chinese boarding school serve as a unique platform for only children to develop their socialising skills. The one-child policy started to be enforced in China in the 1980s, meaning most Chinese families could not have more than one child (Deutsch 2006). In 2016, the government relaxed the policy to two children (Su-Russell and Sanner 2023). As a result, in the 1990s, over 90% of urban kindergarten children were only children (Jiao, Ji, and Jing 1996). Participants in this study were all born during this time. Jieying and Anyang have siblings, while the others are all only children. According to Deutsch (2006), one-child families tended to invest more time and money in child-rearing. As the precious babies, only children were often described as "little emperors", spoiled in their families. On the individual level, I believe that peers at boarding schools fill the blanks in the connections between children of similar ages at home. As narrated and discussed in the previous chapters, boarders experienced a lack of understanding in their family relationships. They could form long-lasting friendships through everyday interactions. On weekends or holidays, boarders also arranged meetings with their peers from boarding schools like Anyang and Yanqi.

At boarding schools, boarders were allocated to dormitory rooms where they needed to share with others. There were usually 6 to 8 students in each room. As Xiaofan mentioned, the shower time needed to be negotiated, and the cleaning

needed to be done, which helped her improve their communication skills. In addition, the participants in this research did not complain much about sharing living conditions with others. I believe that boarders knew they had adequate material support at home, which they expected to enjoy on the weekend. The shared dormitory was not perceived as a cramped living space but as a hub for social interactions. As Yanqi said, they went to different rooms to chat after a day of study. Junxian also mentioned that his roommates became his teammates in ball games. As suggested by Cavenagh and McPherson (2024), random allocation sometimes resembles a lottery, which could lead to different circumstances in peer relationships. To moderate this effect of random allocation, there is also allowance for a change of dormitory room upon request from Hongying's and Anyang's narratives.

Besides the dormitory, boarders also spend time in classrooms with their peers. In Chinese schools, a class typically consists of around 40 students and is managed by a headteacher, where they learn and participate in extracurricular activities together (Gu, Ma, and Teng 2017). As a collective group, the class naturally provides students with a sense of group identity, allowing them to feel a sense of belonging even if they make no effort to integrate into the group. Xiaofan's narrative demonstrates her engagement with her class collective, which provided her with a strong sense of togetherness with her peers. In Anyang's narrative, the class held a significant meaning for her because it was closely tied to her academic performance. Although Jieying did not enjoy her peer group in junior high, she blamed it on a few students, rather than the whole class. The collective group also offers opportunities to take on a leadership role and be responsible for group management, which is known as the cadre system (Y. Shen 2014). Xiujie mentioned her different roles as cadres, helping her classmates with study and managing the class discipline. Junxian narrated his experience as a school cadre, in which he gained various opportunities. Taking up these responsibilities helps boarders understand their own groups, and they also tend to prioritise the collective interest over personal interest, which in turn promotes their sense of belonging to their collective group (Gu, Ma, and Teng 2017).

Chinese culture's deeply rooted collectivist ideas weave different social networks in schools. Boarders can use these groups to develop themselves, make friends, and find solace after their separation from their parents. I believe the peer

relationships in boarding schools cater to the relational and developmental needs of boarders from one-child families.

6.3.4 Too Much to Handle

Living on campus means that boarders are with their peers almost all the time. This frequent contact promotes peer interactions, which, for some boarders, increases their struggles within peer groups. Xiujie mentioned that 24-hour contact with her peers was overwhelming for her. She would rather have temporary companions in day schools. I think her narrative corresponds to the “imaginary audience” proposed by Elkind (1967) suggesting that adolescents believe their appearance and behaviours are constantly noticed, watched and judged by others. In boarding schools, the imaginary “performance” in front of peers never stops, which led to Xiujie’s overwhelming feelings.

Participants in this research all had friends or at least partners during their stay in boarding schools, but some were loners. According to Xiaofan, loners existed in every class. Although they were not bullied, they were considered weird in the boarding school environment. From her perspective in the interview, she believed they “*had distinct personalities and were unwilling to hide certain things.*” From her comments, I infer that boarding school, as an intense social environment, could be challenging for boarders who valued their individual space. This aligns with J. Lee et al. (2024)’s findings that some boarders might seek out friends or partners out of fear of being bullied or perceived as weird.

6.3.5 Bullying

In Hongying’s narrative about bullying, the rumour began in her primary school and spread widely during her first year at the junior day school, before she decided to move to a boarding school. The strong peer cohesiveness in boarding school could make the systematic abuse of power more potent and irrefutable in the peer group (Sharp, Smith, and Smith 2002). In her narrative, her friend and roommates didn’t talk about her in person, but they spoke ill of her behind her back. The frequent communication and recognition among peers could also deepen the stigma and consequently accelerate her internal victimising (Thornberg et al. 2013). In Chinese

boarding schools, collective identity becomes central to each boarder's self-concept, and the proximity amplifies the power of the group. Consequently, rumours can spread rapidly and become difficult to contest.

Hongying's experience of being told to protect her reputation reflects the gendered nature of bullying, as she was held accountable for boys' sexual desires. In Chinese culture, the concept of face, which is self-worth based on the fulfilment of social role obligations dictated by social norms and assessed by others, is crucial for the preservation of social harmony and stability (Aslani et al. 2016). In Hongying's account, the face culture contributed to her obligation as a girl to fulfil an innocent role, suggesting that she should swallow and bear with the bullying and abuse, rather than fighting back.

On the other hand, her closest friends and admirers were her only support during that difficult time. The friendship she had reduced the effect of her victimisation (Moreira, Yunes, and Martins 2023). Hongying's narrative underscores that understanding bullying in Chinese boarding schools requires a relational, culturally contextualised perspective that recognises both the risks and resources embedded within collective life.

6.4 Staff-Student Relationships

The other type of relationship in boarding schools is the one between boarders and staff. Due to the differences in roles and perceptions between narratives in this research, I discuss the teacher and the boarding staff separately.

6.4.1 Rule Enforcer

The boarding staff are tasked with upholding institutional discipline, serving as proxies for the school's authority. Interactions with boarding staff primarily occur in dormitories and canteens within boarding schools. Jieying felt a sense of enforcement rather than care from them, because she and her peers were forced to sleep at a certain time; otherwise, they might lose points. Similar interactions are resonated in other narratives, illustrating the opposition between boarders and the residential staff. While boarders like Junxian evaded conflicts with residential staff, Xiujie expressed an outraged response to them, which resulted in retaliatory actions, escalating the

opposing relationship to a hostile one. Consequently, the boarders did not feel warmth but opposition and hostility in their residential environment.

Fundamentally, I believe this dynamic reflects a structural conflict between adolescents' developmental needs and the rigid enforcement of strict rules in boarding schools. At this age, adolescents increasingly need social activities and exploration of independence (Weiner et al. 2012). Meanwhile, the boarding staff are responsible for enforcing the rules. With inadequate and underqualified staff in the Chinese context (G. Zhu, Chen, and Xuan 2019), their measures tend to be crude and unrelenting. The rigidity of the rules and blunt enforcement made the boarding staff perfect scapegoats for the boarders' projection of frustration and resistance. In the relationship between staff and boarders, the staff were reduced to the role of enforcers. From the boarders' perspective, their presence was perceived not as supportive, but as disciplinary, confined to the institutional rules, creating a relational climate of surveillance and control rather than mutual understanding. In addition, the structural conflict promoted the form of alliance among peers. Through Xiujie and Junxian's narratives, we can see the strengthening of peer relationships in defending against and evading the supervision of the boarding staff.

6.4.2 Moderating and Cultivating

The staff in the study areas, especially the headteachers who care for the students in their classes, appeared to strike a better balance between the rigid rules and students' needs in the narratives. Junxian mentioned that his headteacher was neither too strict nor too relaxed on management. Xiujie narrated in detail how her open-minded teachers managed the class in a relaxed and respectful way. In contrast to enforcement in living areas, teachers' flexibility added a layer of humanistic care, contributing to the boarders' sense of belonging to the class and school. The moderation also extended to the aspect of study in Xiaofan's narrative, where over-time study in the dormitory was not supported, but exercises were encouraged by her head teacher. Teachers also indirectly moderate peer relationships by cultivating the culture of the class collective (Xiaofan) and maintaining the operation of the elected cardes (Junxian). Those subtle moderation and maintenance safeguard a space for development for boarders among their peers.

6.4.3 Attachment Figure vs. Knowledge Deliverer

Cui (2016) and Xiahui Liu (2021) argue that teachers could serve to be “in loco parentis” in the context of Chinese boarding schools, while Xiaoning Liu (2019) argues that teachers in boarding schools focus too much on academic performance and lack empathy. To contribute to this discussion, I explore the teacher-student relationship through the narratives of boarders.

Jieying’s teacher in senior high offered emotional support during her difficult time with exams. Xiujie’s teacher supported her work as a cadre both emotionally and financially when an accident occurred during the money collection. In Anyang’s narrative, her attachment to her primary school teacher was evident. The detailed account of how she and her peers were taken out in turn for meals at home or simple walks shows the intimacy between the teacher and boarders. The young teacher’s understanding of those newly transferred boarders and her extra efforts in inviting them to follow her were moving. There was no professional skill or bombastic help in Anyang’s narrative, but the simple practice of “being there” was soothing for her, who had experienced much abandonment and change in her first 11 years (Brownlie 2014). Besides, Anyang’s narrative about the special treatment she received from teachers showed that she cared about teachers’ approval.

On the other hand, Yanqi perceived her teachers as being too focused on study, as their bonuses were related to the students’ academic performance. When Xiujie asked her teachers extracurricular questions and shared her interests, she was met with cold rejection. In Hongying’s narrative, her teachers not only ignored the bullying she received but also joined her peers in harassing her physically and verbally.

Apart from those narratives, other participants did not express a deep personal engagement with their teachers. I believe that boarders require additional connection and support from teachers when they separate from their families. I also support Verschueren and Koomen (2012)’s view that teacher-student attachment is possible, especially for younger children. Furthermore, I would argue that the need for teacher-student attachment can increase for those who face various family and peer issues. Due to the limited teaching resources in China, teachers often struggle to provide emotional support to every student. It is also worth noting that teaching is a profession;

thus, teachers' actions are restricted by their personal capacity and availability, as well as by school policies.

6.5 Concluding Discussion

The narratives converge around the interplay between institutional structures and individual agency. Within the Chinese context, boarding schools in China are characterised by tightly regulated routines, study-oriented practices, and disciplinary hierarchies. As a common school choice, Chinese boarding schools also serve as spaces for relational negotiation, social development, and emotional navigation. The participants demonstrated their capacity to actively engage with, adapt to, and sometimes resist these structures, whether through peer bonding, reframing family separation, or seeking moments of intimacy with teachers. This duality of being shaped by and shaping the boarding environment constitutes a central insight of this study.

From a relational lens, this study shows that the emotional and psychological lives of boarders are deeply entwined with peer friendships, staff-student interactions, and ongoing negotiations with family roles. The notion of “being there” in peer relationships and the use of mutual narratives in family dynamics highlight how boarders maintain connection and coherence in their social worlds. The support from various relationships also challenges so-called primary or essential relationships in child development. Embedded in the context of China, this study demonstrates how boarding school settings, cultures and dynamics interacted with the impact of the only-child policy, the trend of left-behind children, and collective roots.

The presence of both distress and growth, vulnerability and competence, within narratives challenges binary frameworks and supports a more dynamic model of development in institutional settings. It offers a framework for rethinking the boarding school not simply as a site of suffering or success, but as a complex social space where young people negotiate identities and forge connections within and across institutional boundaries.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

7.1 Summary

This thesis explores the Chinese boarding experience from the boarders' perspectives. Through the co-created narrative of their developmental trajectories before, during and after their stay at boarding schools, this study presents various boarding school experiences, with a focus on relational interactions. The narrative portraits illustrated detailed and nuanced aspects of their lives in different places, including the classroom, canteen, dormitory, and playground at boarding schools, at home, and on journeys in between. Incorporating the social, cultural, historical, and political contexts in China, as well as local regions, schools, and families, the narratives reflected how boarders interacted and engaged with those contexts in their relationships with family, peers, and staff.

Instead of one single, formulaic script, the narratives demonstrated diverse ways and perspectives in the sense-making process of the boarders' experiences of Chinese boarding schools. As protagonists or acting on the side, boarders and other characters were participants, sufferers, respondents, promoters, leaders, initiators, receivers, and decision-makers in their narratives of boarding schools. Through their developmental trajectories, there were different plots, including various scripts of triumph and tragedy (Mayer 2014). Additionally, the narratives also reveal the process of developing an understanding of their experiences based on their past experiences and personal contexts.

It is, therefore, difficult to summarise the Chinese boarding school experience in a few paragraphs, as it is more meaningful to present it in its totality and varies in unique contexts and subjective understandings. By carefully examining the convergence and divergence of the sense-making process in narration (Riessman 2008), I believe that Chinese boarding schools, as a common choice of schooling, meet the basic needs of education and child development and have their strengths and limitations, which often come in pairs. For example, the separation from family can mean suffering from loss of love, but it also means the opportunity to become independent, autonomous, and assertive. After conducting this study, I suggest that no form of school environment can eliminate all struggle or fully support every aspect

of students' development. The different experiences of Chinese boarding schools demonstrate the suitability for each boarder and the unique role of the boarding school environment in their specific developmental context, rather than representing a general impact. All the participants showed a wide range of experiences at boarding schools. For those who enjoyed boarding schools, it appeared that their personal circumstances were well-suited to the boarding school settings. However, the boarders who experienced more suffering than happiness were often unsuitable due to the combined effects of and interactions between their personal issues, family dynamics, and the boarding school settings. The result of this study supports that young children and those who have already experienced trauma and unresolved issues could find the boarding school environment more challenging to cope with or adapt to (Duffell and Basset 2016).

Through the narratives presented in this thesis, the diversity in boarders' relating to others is evident, where I learn limited knowledge in how a student relates to others simply based on their identity as a Chinese boarder. Through their various ways of relating, boarders in Chinese boarding schools are capable of sustaining and establishing relationships with their family, peers and staff at boarding schools based on their specific and unique contexts. In family relationships, both the boarders and their families made efforts to sustain and develop their relationships, which ensured adequate family connections in the weekly separation-reunion setting of boarding schools. The narratives also revealed the effect of relational issues in the family, which could not be resolved by the boarding school environment.

Peer relationships played crucial roles in the lives of boarders at Chinese boarding schools. The increased peer contact promoted competitiveness and collaboration in their academic study. The everyday company of peers, as ordinary friendships, acted as an essential source of support for boarders on campus when needed, especially when their contact with family was limited. At schools, the shared space and attention provided boarders with opportunities to practice communication and negotiation skills as their first step into society from a spoiled family environment in the Chinese context. The frequent contact with peers, however, could result in an unbearable amount of emotional burden and amplify the effect of bullying.

The relationships between staff and children are multifaceted. Different teachers and staff could be regarded and utilised in entirely different ways by boarders. Boarding staff were often considered the rule enforcers at boarding schools, representing the rigorous disciplinary system. Teachers in the academic areas had the primary role of teaching and could offer empathy to boarders subject to their availability, which was inadequate for boarders who needed extra support from teachers.

Reviewing each boarder's relationships, they could establish and sustain relationships with others, rather than passively receiving and waiting for connections. In the face of changes in different settings, they could balance and reconfigure their relationships to adapt to their needs. Boarding schools, as developmental contexts, facilitated this process. As the boarders step into adolescence, the primary emphasis on early relationships with caregivers gradually shifts towards the mutuality in empathy, growth, and resonance within peer relationships in the boarding school context (J.B. Miller and Stiver 1997). I would argue that teachers' roles at boarding schools tended to be regulating, facilitating and moderating, due to the reality of workload and the lack of teachers on campus.

7.2 Strengths and Contributions

It appears that many quantitative studies on boarding schools conduct comparisons between day schools and boarding schools in terms of their impact on students (Zhong, Feng, and Xu 2024). In the qualitative realm, boarding schools are frequently portrayed as sources of psychological distress (Schaverien 2015; Duffell and Basset 2016; Laughton, Paech-Ujejski, and Patterson 2021), or at least placed "on trial" (Cavenagh and McPherson 2024, 154), which implies that boarding schools are under close scrutiny for the possibility of condemnation. In the interviews, some expressions from participants also contain implicit negative views on boarding schools. As an ex-boarder, when disclosing my long stay in boarding schools, I found others felt sorry for me and accused my parents of being irresponsible. The default and implicit understanding of boarding schools in academia, personal interactions, and social perceptions reveals the dominant discourses of trauma and a portrayal of suffering is socially constructed and reinforced. This study aimed to understand the Chinese boarding school experience by examining how boarders make sense of and

relate to others, with the hope of challenging the dominant negative discourses and contributing diverse, context-bound perspectives on the boarding school experience.

This research also provides new perspectives and evidence to address the existing gap and inadequacy in boarding school studies. By employing a narrative method and presenting narrative portraits, this research endeavours to illustrate developmental trajectories. Incorporating family relationships, peer relationships and relationships with teachers, the relational portraits also demonstrate comprehensive views on boarders' relationality, revealing the balancing of relationships. Finally, this research also emphasises the importance of the totality of the boarding school experience, including mundane routines, ordinary interactions, and experiences at home.

In the research field on Chinese boarding schools, few studies mention the cultural, historical or social context. This study examines the contexts in which Chinese boarding schools are situated and explores relevant contexts within specific narratives and relationships. There was a scarcity of background descriptions of Chinese boarding schools. This thesis responds to that by offering contextual narratives that depict the environment and the basic settings of those schools.

For counselling and psychotherapy practice, rather than imposing a dominant pathologising understanding on every client with a history of boarding school experience, this research emphasises the importance of understanding boarding experiences in a subjective and contextual manner. It is also worth exploring different relationships of a client, rather than focusing solely on the so-called primary or essential relationships when working with them. Apart from facilitating the suffering caused by past experience, it could also be helpful to investigate the possibility of social suffering. For counsellors and psychotherapists on a boarding school campus, it may be beneficial for them to reflect on their roles in relation to the overarching boarding school environment and how they and their services are utilised by boarders.

Outside the counselling room, I believe this research can also serve as a starting point for ex-boarders, their parents, and boarding school teachers to reflect on their experiences and the relational dynamics with others. It could also serve as a reference for students and their families to consider when evaluating boarding school as an option.

7.3 Limitations

This research is limited in several ways. The sample size and location limited the demographics of my participants, with one participant attending boarding school in a rural area and only one male participant. Further investigation of differences and similarities between rural and urban boarding schools in China is needed. This research does not address gender issues, as most of the boarding schools in China are not single-gendered. However, research focusing on students of different genders can be helpful in understanding the relational dynamics of peer groups and family relationships.

The employment of narrative methodology enabled the exploration and engagement with the Chinese boarding school experience from each participant's perspective, but it also limited the research, which depended solely on their narrative and reflection with me during a single interview. As Riessman (2008) states, the examination of convergence and divergence of narratives can improve the trustworthiness of the research. Due to the time constraint, I can only examine the narratives from the boarders' perspectives. Future research can incorporate the perspectives of staff and especially parents, who were rarely investigated in existing research.

7.4 Reflections

During the process of conducting this research, I was also deeply moved by the narratives of my participants, not so much when I was focusing on the narration process in the interviews, but especially when I repeatedly listened to, coded, translated, arranged, and analysed those materials. Spending time with those narratives alone, I was immersed in the vivid experiences as if I were reliving them again. I was awed by the power of narrative and the diverse and rich experiences of Chinese boarding schools from each participant.

On the other hand, I also gained more insights and perspectives about Chinese boarding schools myself. I reflected more with my therapists in counselling settings and talked with my parents, peers and teachers about boarding school experiences. During the process of writing up, I also visited my junior high boarding school, where I felt like a stranger as I graduated from there more than 13 years ago. My peers had

left, and only a few teachers remained. I also felt at home, welcomed by the quietness of the classrooms, the breeze through the hallway and the laughter on the playground. To me, the journey through Chinese boarding schools is not just a memory in the past, but a living narrative—still unfolding and still home.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Flyer (Chinese)



 **研究采访招募**

博士研究课题邀请有中国寄宿学校经历的您参加90分钟的采访，采访内容主要围绕这段经历
要求您18岁以上，有曾经在中国大陆地区至少连续一年的寄宿中小学校就读经历，学年内至多每周在家住两晚

为了感谢您的参与，您将在采访后获得10镑或90元
如果您对该研究感兴趣，请您通过电子邮件联系我

聂天目
s1668862@ed.ac.uk



Translation:

Research Interview Recruitment

Doctoral research invites participants who have Chinese boarding school experience to a 90-minute interview about this experience.

The requirement includes being more than 18 years old and having at least one year of consecutive primary or secondary boarding school experience in mainland China, based on a weekly or fortnightly schedule.

To appreciate your participation, you will receive 10 British pounds or 90 Chinese Yuan.

If you are interested in this research, please contact me via email.

Tianmu Nie

s1668862@ed.ac.uk

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet (Chinese)

参与者信息表

项目标题: 中国寄宿学校经历 (工作标题)

研究者姓名: 聂天目

学习项目: 心理治疗与咨询专业博士课程 (Professional Doctorate in Psychotherapy and Counselling)

电子邮件地址: s1668862@ed.ac.uk

您被邀请参与这项研究。在您决定是否参与之前，重要的是您理解研究的目的以及参与过程。请您仔细阅读以下信息，并如有需要，与朋友或家人讨论。请您慎重考虑是否愿意参与。如果您需要更多信息，请随时与我联系。感谢您阅读此信息。

研究目的是什么？

这项研究旨在了解中国寄宿学校经历与环境变换的关系，探索与家中环境和寄宿学校环境的分离，以及这些经历对成年后其他人际关系的影响。

研究内容包括什么？

您将被邀请参与深度访谈，访谈可以面对面进行，也可以通过 Zoom 或 Teams 进行在线访谈。每次访谈的持续时间会因您愿意分享的内容而有所不同，大约为 60 至 90 分钟。

在访谈中，您将被邀请分享您在寄宿学校的经历。为了了解您的经历，我将询问一些关于您的人口统计信息、寄宿学校背景和家庭历史的问题。

您将被鼓励反思与家人和学校环境分离有关的经历，以及您对这些经历的理解，以及这些经历如何影响您与他人的关系。在访谈结束时，您将有机会补充或更改您之前的回答。

所有访谈都将被录音和转录，您的个人信息将被匿名化处理，因此您的身份不会被披露。

谁会参与研究？

如果您是一名成年人，并且在 6 至 18 岁之间至少在中国的寄宿学校学习过一年，您可以参与这项研究。

是否必须参与？

参与与否由您决定。如果您决定参与，您将会收到此信息表并被要求签署同意书。如果您在访谈完成日期后两周内决定退出，无需提供原因，您可以撤回您的数据。

我有兴趣参与，接下来该怎么做？

如果您有兴趣参与此研究，请通过电子邮件联系我：s1668862@ed.ac.uk 之后，您将收到一个同意书，供您签署。

如果我同意参与然后改变主意怎么办？

如果您希望撤回您的数据，包括访谈内容，您可以在访谈完成日期后两周内这样做，此后将无法撤回数据。您可以在访谈过程中告知我或发送电子邮件通知我退出研究。如果您退出研究，您的所有数据，包括访谈的录音和转录，将被永久删除。

参与研究有可能带来的不利影响和风险是什么？

由于该研究涉及与分离有关的经历，可能会引起情感困扰。如果在访谈过程中您感到不安，作为一名心理治疗师，我将具备必要的技能来支持您。访谈将暂停，以便您可以整理思绪，如果您愿意的话。我将为您提供有关访谈后支持资源的信息。请注意，作为研究者，我无法为您提供心理咨询，但我可以为您提供有关心理咨询机构的推荐信息。

参与研究的可能好处是什么？

在面试结束后，您将获得一张 90 人民币的在线礼品券，作为感谢。这张礼品券将在面试进行后提供给您。如果您在面试过程中决定退出，仍然可以保留这张礼品券。

如果出现问题怎么办？

本研究的风险很小。然而，如果您在参与此研究项目时受到伤害，将不会有特殊的赔偿安排。如果由于某人的过失导致您受伤，那么您可能有权提起法律诉讼的权利，但您可能需要自行支付相关费用。无论如何，如果您希望投诉，或对在研究过程中的任何方面有任何疑问，您可以使用爱丁堡大学常规的投诉机制。

我可以向谁投诉？

如果您对与这项研究有关的任何事情投诉，您可以首先联系我作为首席研究员。如果没有令您满意的结果，您应该联系爱丁堡大学社会科学健康学院院长 hos.health@ed.ac.uk。

我的参与会保密吗？

在研究过程中收集的您的所有信息将保存在受密码保护的计算机和位于爱丁堡大学的 OneDrive 服务中，严格保密。同意书将被签署，只有我作为研究者可以访问。您将获得一个化名，用于替代您的真实姓名。所有材料将在论文提交后保留 5 年，以用于开发与博士项目相关的学术出版物和活动。

您还应该了解，如果您提供的信息揭示了对弱势个体造成伤害，我可能有义务传达这些信息。

研究结果会如何处理？

您对本研究的贡献将用于我的博士学位论文，并有可能发表在研究期刊和会议报告中。如果您希望获取最终研究论文的副本，请通过电子邮件与我联系。

谁组织和资助了这项研究？

我组织并资助了这项研究。

研究已经得到了审查吗？

这项研究已经经过爱丁堡大学社会科学健康学院研究伦理委员会的审查和批准。

进一步信息的联系方式

如果您对此研究项目有任何进一步的问题或疑虑，请联系：

研究者姓名：聂天目

学习项目：心理治疗与咨询专业博士课程（Professional Doctorate in Psychotherapy and Counselling）

电子邮件：s1668862@ed.ac.uk

导师姓名：Edgar Rodriguez-Dorans

电子邮件：

学院院长姓名：Matthias Schwannauer 教授

电子邮件：headofschool.health@ed.ac.uk

感谢您抽出时间阅读此信息表。

Appendix 3: Participant Information Sheet (English)

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Title of Project: Chinese boarding school experience and Separation (working title)

Name of Investigators: Tianmu Nie

Programme of studies: Professional Doctorate in Psychotherapy and Counselling

Email address: s1668862@ed.ac.uk

You have been invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether to take part it is important for you to understand why the study is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with friends and relatives if you wish to. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part or not. Please feel free to contact me if you need more information. Thank you for reading this.

What is the study about?

This research study aims at understanding the experience of Chinese boarding schools in relation to changes of the environment. It explores the separation from family and the boarding school environment. The research also aims to investigate the impact on other relationships in adult life.

What does the study involve?

You will be invited to participate in an in-depth interview which will take place in-person or online via Zoom or Teams. The duration of each interview may vary depending on how much you would like to share. The approximate duration of the interview will be 60 to 90 mins.

In the interview, you will be invited to share stories about your boarding school experience. In order to understand your experience, I will ask for some demographic information about you and some information about your boarding school, family background and history.

You will be encouraged to reflect on experiences related to separation from your family and school environment, as well as your understanding of those experiences and how those experiences affect your relationships with others. You will have opportunities to add on or change what you have said at the end of this interview.

All interviews will be recorded and transcribed and your personal information will be anonymised, so your identity will not be disclosed.

Who can participate?

You can participate in this study if you are an adult and you attended a boarding school in China for at least one year between the ages of 6 and 18.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw your data within two weeks of the completion date of the interview and without giving a reason.

I am interested in taking part, what do I do next?

If you are interested in taking part in this study, please contact me through email: s1668862@ed.ac.uk You then will be sent a consent form to sign up.

What if I agree to take part and then change my mind?

If you wish to withdraw your data including interview content, you can do so within two weeks of the completion date of the interview after which withdrawal of data will not be possible. You can withdraw from the study by letting me know during the interview or by sending me an email.

If you withdraw from the study, all data collected from you including the recording and transcripts of the interviews will be deleted permanently.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Since the study is concerned with experiences of separation, it can potentially cause emotional distress. If you become upset during the interview, as a counsellor and psychotherapist, I will have the necessary skills to support you. The interview will pause so you can gather yourself if you wish. I will provide you with information about sources of support after the interviews. Please note that as the researcher, I will not be able to provide you with counselling but I can offer you referral information about counselling agencies.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

After the interview, you will receive a £10 online voucher as a token of appreciation.

You will be given this voucher after the interview has been conducted. If you decide to drop out during the interview, you will still be able to keep the voucher.

What if something goes wrong?

The interview involves very little risk. However, if you are harmed by taking part in this research project, there are no special compensation arrangements. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, then you may have grounds for legal action but you may have to pay for it. Regardless of this, if you wish to complain, or have any concerns about any aspect of the way you have been approached or treated during the course of this study, the normal University of Edinburgh complaints mechanisms should be available to you.

Who can I complain to?

If you have a complaint regarding anything to do with this study, you can initially approach me as the lead investigator. If this achieves no satisfactory outcome, you should then contact the Head of the School of Health in Social Sciences, University of Edinburgh hos.health@ed.ac.uk.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

All information collected about you during the course of the research will be kept on a password-protected computer and the OneDrive service at the University of Edinburgh, which are strictly confidential. Consent forms will be signed and only I as the researcher have access to them. You will be given a pseudonym which will be used instead of your name. All materials will be kept for 5 years after the thesis has been submitted for the purpose of developing academic publications and events associated with the doctoral project.

You should also be aware that I may be duty-bound to pass on information that you provide that reveals harm has occurred to a vulnerable individual.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The information you contribute to this study will be used for my doctorate thesis and potential publication in research journals, and conference presentations.

A copy of the completed research study can be sent to you upon request. Please contact me via email if you would like to obtain a copy of the final research paper.

Who is organising and funding the research?

I am organising and funding the research.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Edinburgh, School of Health in Social Science Research Ethics Committee

Contact for Further Information

If you have any further questions or concerns about this research study, please contact:

Name of researcher: Tianmu Nie

Programme of studies: Professional Doctorate in Psychotherapy and Counselling

Email: s1668862@ed.ac.uk

Name of supervisor: Edgar Rodriguez-Dorans

Email:

Name of school head: Professor Matthias Schwannauer

Email: headofschool.health@ed.ac.uk

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Appendix 4: Consent Form (Chinese)

研究参与知情同意书

研究题目: 中国寄宿学校经历

研究者姓名 聂天目

研究者电子邮箱 s1668862@ed.ac.uk

参与者 编号: _____

请打勾

1. 我确认我已阅读且理解了上述研究项目的参与者信息表 (第五版 2023/09/01)。
2. 我有时间和机会思考提供的研究相关信息和提出研究相关的问题， 这些问题得到了令我满意的答复。
3. 我明白我的参与是自愿的， 并且在接受访谈后的两周内， 我可以要求退出研究， 无需提供理由。
4. 我了解我的匿名数据将被保存至多 5 年， 并可能用于与本博士研究相关的学术发表和学术活动中。
5. 我了解在研究期间收集的相关数据可能会被赞助方（爱丁堡大学）的相关人员查看， 当这些数据与我的参与研究相关时。我同意这些人员可以访问匿名访谈数据。
6. 我知晓目前参与该研究可能存在与新型冠状病毒潜在接触有关的风险， 并理解已采取的措施以减小接触和传播的风险。
7. 我同意对我的访谈进行录音。我知道直接引用可能会被用在由该研究得出的任何书面论文中。
8. 我同意参与上述研究。

给予同意人姓名

日期

签名

取得同意人姓名

日期

签名

Appendix 5: Consent Form (English)

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Study Title: Chinese boarding school experience

Researcher's name Tianmu Nie

Researcher's email address s1668862@ed.ac.uk

Participant ID: _____

Please tick box

- | | |
|---|--------------------------|
| 9. I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet (Version 4 01 09 2023) for the above study | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. I have been given the opportunity to consider the information provided, ask questions and have had these questions answered to my satisfaction | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can ask to withdraw two weeks after the interview without giving a reason. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12. I understand that my anonymised data will be stored for a maximum of 5 years and may be used for the purpose of academic publications and events associated to this doctoral project. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 13. I understand that relevant sections of my data collected during the study may be looked at by individuals from the Sponsor (University of Edinburgh), where it is relevant to my taking part in this research. I give permission for these individuals to have access to the anonymised data from my interview. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 14. I am aware that participating in this study at the current time may carry risks in relation to potential exposure to coronavirus, and I understand the steps that have been taken in relation to minimise the risks of exposure and transmission | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 15. I agree to my interview being recorded. I am aware that verbatim quotes could be use in any written papers resulting from the study | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 16. I agree to take part in the above study | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Name of person giving consent

Date

Signature

Name of person taking consent

Date

Signature

Appendix 6: Debriefing Sheet (Chinese)

访谈后告知单

感谢您对这项研究的贡献。本研究关注寄宿学校经历与分离对其他人际关系的影响。如果您希望获得最终发表的研究文章的副本，可以通过以下联系方式与我取得联系。您的个人信息将始终保密，保持完全匿名。所有数据将保存在受密码保护的计算机和OneDrive上，只有作为研究者的我可以访问。材料将保存至论文提交日期起五年。您可以在访谈完成日期（输入日期）后两周内撤回您的数据。您可以通过电子邮件通知我撤回数据，无需提供原因。

如果在研究过程中您受到研究中提出的一些问题的影响，可以联系以下机构以得到保密的支持：

英国的机构：

Samaritans

Samaritans is a registered charity aimed at providing emotional support to anyone in emotional distress, struggling to cope, or at risk of suicide throughout the United Kingdom and Ireland.

T: 116 123

E: jo@samaritans.org

W: <https://www.samaritans.org/>

Breathing Space (Scotland)

A confidential phone for anyone in Scotland over the age of 16, feeling low, anxious or depressed.

T:0800 83 85 87

W: <https://breathingspace.scot/>

Shout 85258

Shout 85258 is a free, confidential, 24/7 text messaging support service for anyone who is struggling to cope.

Text:85258 (24/7 text support)

W: <https://giveusashout.org/>

中国的机构

希望24热线-生命教育与危机干预中心：提供免费的7*24小时生命危机干预热线，为大众提供生命教育、危机预防、危机干预、应急支援、支持性小团体、公益讲座、生命教育进校园等心理服务。

- 电话：400 161 9995

- 网站：<http://www.hope9995.com/about/show.php?lang=cn&id=19>

北京心理危机研究与干预中心：北京市心理援助热线设在北京心理危机研究与干预中心，面向公众，每天24小时由获得北京心理危机研究与干预中心危机干预热线接线员资格认证的心理咨询人员接听。服务的重点人群是抑郁、有自杀倾向和遭遇其他心理危机的个体。

- 电话：800 810 1117; 010 829 51332

- 网站：<http://www.crisis.org.cn/Home/Index>

广州市心理危机干预中心热线：提供24小时免费心理援助热线。

- 电话：020 818 99120; 020 12320 5

- 网站：<https://www.gzcrisis.com/>

上海市心理援助热线：通过电话咨询提供专业性心理援助服务。服务时间：每周7天，周一、三、五、日8:00 - 22:00；周二、四、六，全天24小时。

- 电话：021 12320 5

- 网站：<http://www.12320-5.org.cn/>

研究者联系方式：

聂天目

电子邮件：s1668862@ed.ac.uk

就读项目：心理治疗与咨询专业博士课程 (Professional Doctorate in Psychotherapy and Counselling)

Appendix 7: Debriefing Sheet (English)

Debriefing Sheet

Thank you for your contribution to this research study. This study focuses on boarding school experiences in relation to separation and the impact on other relationships.

If you would like to obtain a copy of the final published research article, you are welcome to contact me using the contact details below.

Your details will be kept confidential at all times, maintaining complete anonymity. All data will be kept in a password-protected computer and OneDrive, which are only accessible to me as the researcher. Materials will be kept until five years have passed from the date of thesis submission. You can withdraw your data within two weeks of the completion date of the interview (DATE TO BE ENTERED). You can withdraw your data by informing me via email. If you decide to do so, you will not be asked to provide a reason.

If you have been affected by some of the issues raised in this study during the research process, you can contact the following organisations for support in confidence:

Organisations in the UK

Samaritans

Samaritans is a registered charity aimed at providing emotional support to anyone in emotional distress, struggling to cope, or at risk of suicide throughout the United Kingdom and Ireland.

T: 116 123

E: jo@samaritans.org

W: <https://www.samaritans.org/>

Breathing Space (Scotland)

A confidential phone for anyone in Scotland over the age of 16, feeling low, anxious or depressed.

T:0800 83 85 87

W: <https://breathingspace.scot/>

Shout 85258

Shout 85258 is a free, confidential, 24/7 text messaging support service for anyone who is struggling to cope.

Text:85258 (24/7 text support)

W: <https://giveusashout.org/>

Organisations in China:

希望 24 热线-生命教育与危机干预中心

希望 24 热线志愿服务中心是一条免费的 7*24 小时生命危机干预热线。为大众提供生命教育、危机预防、危机干预、应急支援、支持性小团体、公益讲座、生命教育进校园等心理服务。

T: 400 161 9995

W: <http://www.hope9995.com/about/show.php?lang=cn&id=19>

北京心理危机研究与干预中心

北京市心理援助热线设在北京心理危机研究与干预中心，面向公众，每天 24 小时由获得北京心理危机研究与干预中心危机干预热线接线员资格认证的心理咨询人员接听。服务的重点人群是抑郁、有自杀倾向和遭遇其它心理危机的个体。

T: 800 810 1117; 010 829 51332

W: <http://www.crisis.org.cn/Home/Index>

广州市心理危机干预中心热线

广州市心理危机干预中心提供 24 小时免费心理援助热线。

T: 020 818 99120; 020 12320 5

W: <https://www.gzcrisis.com/>

上海市心理援助热线

上海市心理援助公益热线通过电话咨询提供专业性心理援助服务。服务时间：每周 7 天，周一、三、五、日 8:00 - 22:00; 周二、四、六，全天 24 小时。

T: 021 12320 5

W: <http://www.12320-5.org.cn/>

Researcher's Contact details:

Tianmu Nie

Email: s1668862@ed.ac.uk

Programme of studies: Professional Doctorate in Psychotherapy and Counselling

Appendix 8: Excerpt of Coding in Transcription

In this section, I use the transcription of the interview between Xiaofan (晓帆) and me (天目) to illustrate how I work on the Chinese narratives. In the coding process, I adopt the narrative commonplaces proposed by (Clandinin 2022) and also follow the trace of important relational characters in Chinese boarding school experiences.

Legend

Commonplaces Markers: Temporality Sociality *Place*

Relational Markers: Family Peer Staff

天目：我们谈到现在，就是主要在说你和家庭，然后我就是，嗯，也挺好奇，就是当时你去这个学校做出这个决定是一个什么样的一个决定？是家里人告诉你说这个学校好，还是就是怎么样做出的这个决定？

晓帆：嗯，一方面是那学校确实是我们那儿的比较好的一个学校。明白，然后好像就是我们那边寄宿也比较普遍，就是考上，就是我们那有两个可能有三四个比较好的那种，嗯，公立高中或者是私立高中都是寄宿制，所以可能就是也没有太大的说，必须要在这一块去选择。

天目：懂了，对，就主要还是，嗯在中考的时候，然后自己可以上到这个，这个学校挺好的，就没有再想寄宿这个事情了。

晓帆：因为大家都是，就是学校都是寄宿，所以就不存在一个说选择这种问题。

天目：明白，那我还想了解一下，就是你在去这个学校之前，嗯，就是没有寄宿经历，是任何经历没有。那你去了之前是什么样的？就怎么是有什么期待呢？或者有什么，还是就其实也觉得也没有，就觉得就是可能去了之后才有点。

晓帆：太远，太遥远了。肯定会有紧张和害怕，因为也不知道是什么样，然后要跟人一起相处。是。等于说之前都是跟家里人嘛？都是在家里，然后那就会有室友，然后你也不知道室友人怎么样，然后可能包括说其实我觉得还比较好的是因为我们有食堂，什么就是不存在，可能生活自理方面。除了说可能洗澡、洗衣服，然后这些，其他的没有太大的那个对生活自理能力的要求，所以就还好，可能就是最多就是担心一下室友，然后可能会觉得说嗯，毕竟上高中嘛，他还是一个嗯，怎么说就是一个不只是从说家里然后到宿舍这样一个区别，还有是从可能进入高中这样一个新的阶段的这种感觉，所以可能都混在一起了。

天目：进入高中的这个阶段对你来说是一个什么样的过程？是学习还是就是学你指的这个阶段是学习还是学习？

晓帆：可能更多是学习。

天目：明白，那你家长有没有就是问过，就是说：啊，这个女儿要去这个寄宿学校了，然后有没有，他们有没有怎么担心？或者怎么，有没有嘱咐你？嗯，或者是他们有没有就是问过你的感受？

晓帆：也有吧，就是肯定会嘱咐说，比如说什么东西带什么东西不带这种之类的。嗯，或者是可能就是也会去，就是可能会有认识的其他的，他们的朋友的小孩，可能我的师兄师姐之类的在那个学校，然后其实我的表哥表姐都在那个学校过，但我进去的时候他们已经走了，但是反正他们都在那个学校待过，然后就会带着我去找他们去问问就是在那个学校是什么样的感受，然后包括说生活上什么注意的这种东西。

天目：所以当时之前还有跟，就是去校友聊过的感觉。噢，我明白了。那听完你是就觉得？

晓帆：就是会有一个还是有一点准备了，相当于心理准备上。

天目：就是心理上有一些准备。那，嗯，你觉得因为你之前初中的时候就是走读，嗯，这个或者还有之前都是走读，嗯，你觉得他跟就是寄宿学校跟走读有就区有区别吗？或者区别在哪？对于你来说。

晓帆：嗯，我觉得更多的可能是就是跟同学的关系会更紧密一些，因为毕竟是一整天都在一起，然后也会对如果说什么集体的那种凝聚力什么应该也会有影响。

Appendix 9: Translating and Analysing

In this section, I use Jieying's narrative to illustrate how I work with Chinese narratives. Please see the translation (T) and analysis (A) notes after the original and translated narratives. In the analytical process, I identify the significant markers in the narrative proposed by Josselson and Hammack (2021): primacy, frequency, incompleteness, uniqueness, negation, omission, emphasis and contradictions. Additionally, I pay attention to the evaluation of participants. I highlight those in bold in my analytical notes.

初中，我只想早点走，因为你知道那种氛围，那种朋友也没有啥的。嗯，高中的话就，嗯，我们高中氛围我觉得是我的天堂

高中大概是相对来说，嗯，比较单纯一点，就那种大家卯足的劲往一个目标冲。

"You knew my junior high school, I just wanted to leave it soon. My senior high school was like a paradise to me compared to that."

"There was more pressure of studying in senior high school but it felt like everyone was working hard for the same goal."

A: There is a clear **emphasis** on the comparison between the two boarding environments, so I organise Jieying's school life in a comparative style.

就大家经常开玩笑什么的，我就容易跟大家就我们高中就是有股风，就是非常喜欢起外号黑人就是就是我们喜欢开玩笑，就是那种就经常调侃对方的那种感觉，所以我们经常就喜欢这么搞，然后，所以就那个时候高中其实还挺幸福的就，我有外号，别人有外号我们就互相喊来喊去，然后我跟女生也玩，挺好的，跟男生一起玩什么的都还挺好。

"Our classmates often joked about each other. There was a trend called 'Heiren'. We gave each other nicknames and teased each other. We loved doing that. I had my nickname and others had theirs. We called each other's nicknames. I played this with both girls and boys. It was fun."

T: The direct translation of "Heiren" would be "black people". The word "black" is used as a verb, meaning to attack someone verbally by calling out their differences or weaknesses.

The concept of “Heiren” is nuanced, tied to peer relationships and cultural context. As it is a combination of nicknames and banter in an intimate and joking way, I choose not to translate it into English.

A: This interaction is a **unique** way of interacting with peers, which reflects the intimacy of peer interactions.

然后但是高中我还挺感谢我那个班主任的，因为我班主任是个女的，然后平时我就说晚自习，有时候不想搞学习累了，然后有时候高三的时候就会去找她，去办公室找她，然后就聊天，她就开导我什么。

高中的话可能就是自己学会主动去跟别人，嗯，跟老师那种级别的人建立联系，所以就会经常多跟他们聊天什么的，然后因为主要也觉得跟老师聊天，跟爸妈聊天还不跟老师聊天，因为老师我觉得他真的能懂我们的压力

“I was really grateful for my female head teacher in my senior high school.

Sometimes I was tired and did not want to study during the evening self-study time. I would find her in her office and chat with her. She would soothe me with her words and patience.”

“In senior high school, I would actively approach others, and build relationships with people at different levels like my teachers, so I often chat with them. Chatting with teachers was better than chatting with parents because I think they could really understand our pressure.”

T: I choose to merge several sentences and information together in the translation process.

A: Following the focus on comparison between two boarding schools, I rearrange the interactions with teachers here. This part also features a **comparison** between and **evaluation** of her relationships with family and teachers.

就是有时候可能早上起来我还没搞完，他已经搞完了。我说那你先去吃早饭吗？你不要等我，你去吃完早饭就去学校，就他就可以学校搞学习什么的嘛？不然他花时间等我，就，所以我就觉得就导致我现在叫就一直属于这种状态，就不会想着，噢，我得等你什么什么的连在一起，我会想要这样子。

所以我就觉得你有什么事能自己搞，你就自己搞完就进入下一个环节了，你还这么拖拖拉拉，还找别人陪着你一起，什么上厕所怎么样？回家什么的，就觉得那你时间都没了，你怎么赶紧搞下一个东西？

“When I woke up, my friends probably had finished their morning routine. Then I would tell them to go for breakfast first. ‘You don’t need to wait for me. You can finish breakfast and get to the classroom, then start studying early.’ Otherwise, they would need to waste time waiting for me. That is not what I want in relationships.”

“Holding each other up was very unnecessary, especially when we were in a fast-paced environment. With all the pressure, I thought one should do everything on their own and quickly move to the next thing after finishing. You could waste a lot of time going to the toilets together or going home.”

T: I add several sentence components to make the narratives flow better.

A: This is an essential part, as it represents a crossover of her style of relating to peers in the fast-paced boarding school setting. Her **evaluation** of peer relationships also continues to contribute to her **primary** relating style: independence.

高中我就觉得我一直属于那种，那个时候就什么都不懂，我记得当时我朋友我玩的比较好的那种同学，他还跟我讲，他说可能到时候我们这一分开之后就没有再没有什么机会能见到了。

我们进入不同的人生阶段，我觉得他的美好仅存在于那个阶段。没必要再去纠结什么的，就是我觉得能做的挺好的，就是现在回忆起来我有那么多开心的，我觉得我就已经值得了，就没必要再去多么留恋，就大家都要往前走，每个人的生活不一样就有时候甚至都是他主动找我讲话，我都觉得很尴尬什么的，我就觉得就有时候觉得为什么要主动联系呢？就既然大家都不同的生活都走远了，我们就保持那个就好，就相当于维持我们小时候很美好的形象在那就可以了，你没必要再非得强求把两个走远的人拉在一起碰撞，然后大家发现形象说不定又破灭了，对吧？嗯，你不联系的话，至少美好形象一直在。那就高中也是那种状态。就我觉得以前美好过就是挺好的，没必要再就非得强行再联系什么的了。

“I remembered one friend that I played along with. We were very good friends. He told me that once we separated, there was very little chance of seeing each other again. I

was young and did not believe it, but I found it right afterwards...I think the beauty of the relationships we built in school should only stay in that period of our lives. We were all good friends at that time, and those memories were precious. We all moved on to different life paths... Sometimes I would feel awkward when my classmates tried to reach out to me. I wonder why we had to reach out to each other actively... There is no need to drag two people together when they are already parted. They might turn out to be completely different, and the good impression is disillusioned. If we do not contact, the good impression will stay as it was."

T: As the narratives come from different parts of the transcription, I add some connections. There is a change of subjects in the sentences from Jieying. I endeavour to keep the "I"s and "We"s. However, I did not keep the use of "you"s in hypothetical sentences, as it is a grammatical expression in Chinese, which could lead to confusion. I choose to change the expression instead.

A: This theme is **repeated** several times in different parts of Jieying's narratives, which again **emphasises** her independence developed in the boarding school environment. I think Jieying offers an **evaluation** and her understanding of peer relationships, stemming from the contrast between the intimacy and independence she felt towards her senior high school peers.

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