COMMUNITY SCHOOL

An experiment on a communal space for Chinese students abroad

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THE COMMUNITIES IN WHICH I HAVE LIVED...

I am putting down these notes in the first place, hoping to provide some contexts for what I will be talking about, and to better explicate my motivation for this project.

02/12/2021---

It has been 15 months since I left China and began my new study in the Netherlands. It was a significant change, not only in terms of location, language, or currency, but also in terms of the surrounding community. I have already spent five year as a member of student communities in China, so I intuitively hope to continue my daily life being part of the Chinese student communities in the Netherlands.

On my arrival in the Netherlands, I was surprised that the Chinese students living here did not appear to be as connected as I had expected. In my conversations with friends who also studied in the Netherlands, most of them expressed willingness to engage in collective activities with other Chinese students, but few of them could take the initiative to organise gatherings due to a lack of space. Living in the Netherlands, I already found it hard to find a place to live, let alone having a place in public that suits Chinese social habits. All of these made the sense of community that I had in China absent from my daily life.
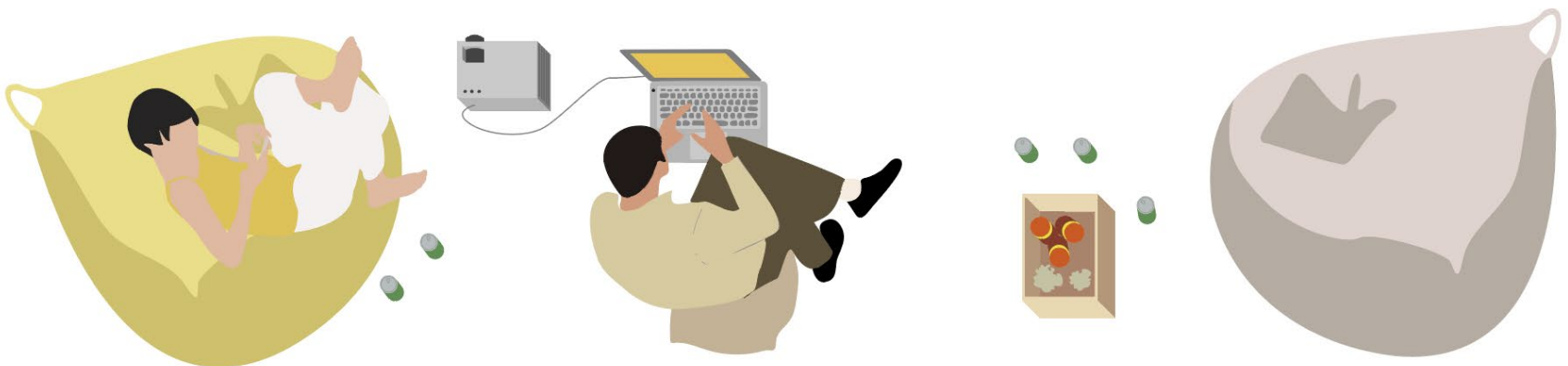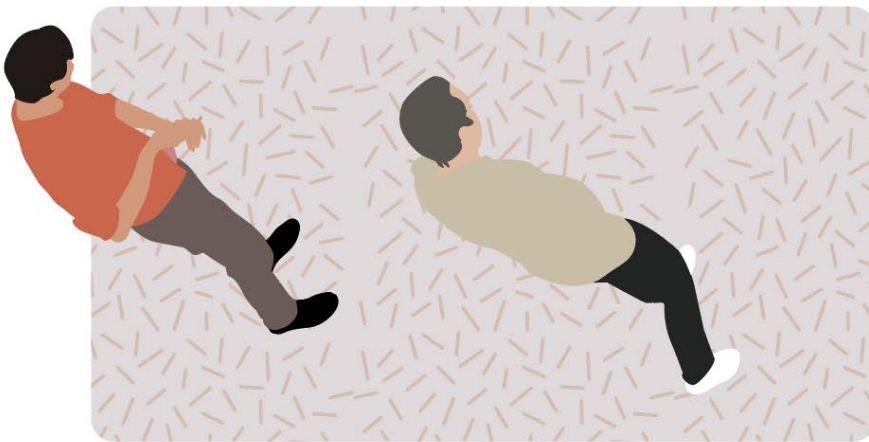
This fading of a sense of community did not grab my attention at first, but the longer I stayed in the Netherlands, the more I became aware of the change.

Image #1

The last gathering of my classmates.

Beijing, 16/08/2020

... And we danced...

As I recall my past five years at Central Academy of Fine Arts in China, the sense of community firstly emerged in my co-living with five roommates in a dormitory on campus. While my graduation year approached, I gradually stayed longer and longer in my graduation studio (Studio 10). The sense of community therefore shifted to grow in the Studio 10.

After my graduation in 2020, I went to pursue a master study at KABK in the Netherlands. From then on, my longing for the sense of community that I had in China started to sprout. In October 2021, the beginning of the second year of my master study, I happened to visit a self-initiated association in Bruxelles, which inspired me to conceive a similar one which could undertake a community of the Chinese students abroad.

01/09/2015---

On that day, I moved from my parents' flat to the CAFA campus in Beijing. For the first time, my personal space was compressed into a student dormitory of about 20 square meters. The space was shared by me and other five male students. We usually spent 12 hours per day in the dormitory, from 8 pm till the next morning. The dormitory life almost covered every aspect of our lives apart from classes, it tightly knitted our lives. Sometimes our co-living was indeed overwhelming, but the interwoven memories it contained were undeniably valuable. I still deeply remember our first awkward greetings, the only alarm clock which went off for six of us, and the anonymous snoring...

A sense of community naturally sprouted out from the intimacy we had created together. I did not realise that, from this moment, living with a sense of community would become an important part of my study period.

01/09/2019---

It was at the beginning of my final undergraduate year at CAFA. I and my classmates were assigned a blank studio (Studio 10) in the teaching building for our graduation projects. As the need for space and privacy kept growing, we started to occupy the Studio 10 and fill it up with our personal belongings:[1] sofas, fold-able beds, cats, hamsters, Mocha pots, induction cookers, handicraft collection stands, and so on. Beyond the physical occupation, new social relationships arose as well, transforming the studio into a multifunctional space: a classroom for portfolio classes, a playground for cats, and even a kitchen to practice cooking......Since then, the sense of community has been extended through various spontaneous activities. It was visualized through the accumulation of our personal items, and enhanced my sense of belonging to this community of Studio 10.

Unfortunately, this sense of community has come to its end because the corona broke out in that winter. It only lasted for three months, but it left a long lasting impression on me.

Image #2

A haircut in Studio 10 at CAFA.

Beijing, 01/10/2019

1 See the illustration in the hidden layer of the next page

...We happened to have recorded the Studio 10
like this...

*Group work by Studio 10

02/09/2020---

I luckily managed to arrive in the Netherlands during a tough time of corona. I rented a furnished studio in the Hague, and it was my very first time to have a space of my own and live by myself.

I enjoyed living alone, but I could not get rid of those memories of my dormitory life, my Studio 10, and all the enjoyable moments in the communities with my roommates and classmates. I tried to approach other Chinese students in the Netherlands, but since it was not easy to find a place for us to use collectively, every gathering of us ended up as either shopping or dining. Compared to my former communities at CAFA, these instant gatherings did not leave much impression on me, but it made me wonder:

> *What would other communities do if they have a wish for a place of their own, and how will the community space look like?*

14/10/2021---

I travelled to Bruxelles and occasionally visited 'Recyclart', a self-initiated association that reused an abandoned paper factory as their home base. It managed to survive by offering public music performances, exhibitions, meals, and furniture repair. There, I saw people spontaneously meet for various reasons: for work opportunities, for fun, for skill acquisition, for developing contacts, and so on.
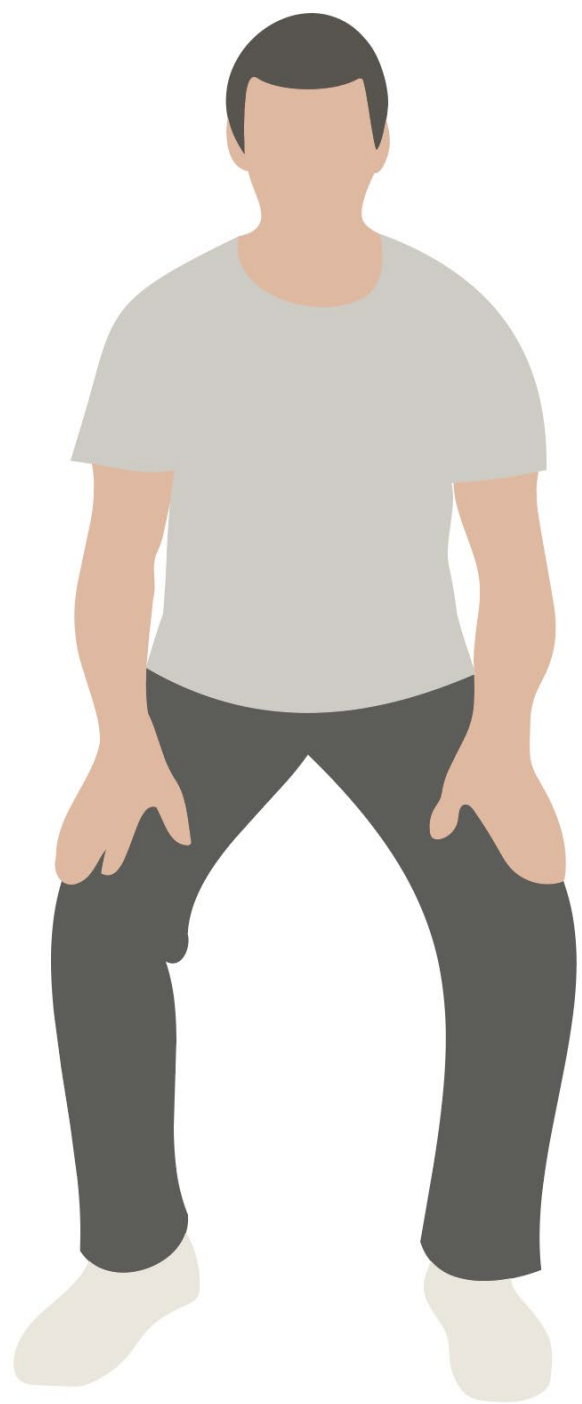
> *I didn't know much about 'Recyclart' at that moment, but it suddenly reminded me of some flashback scenes from my sense of community in the Studio 10 at CAFA, my old university.*

Image #3

My rented studio in the Hague.

Den Haag, 09/02/2021

...All by myself...

Faced with the absence of a sense of community among Chinese students in the Netherlands, I wonder if there is a space that Chinese students abroad could use? Could this space be developed by Chinese students abroad in a similar way to 'Recyclart' in Bruxelles? I became interested in investigating this sense of community:

How can I thoroughly understand this sense of community that began in a Chinese school dormitory?

Could this community continue to exist in the Netherlands?

If I manage to answer the two questions above, what could be my position to interfere?

My research begins with the field research and the theoretical readings.

The field research adopts interview as the main tool, my interviewees include the Chinese students abroad (mainly based in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom). In my interviews with the Chinese student abroad, I focus on their personal storytelling about how they understand 'the sense of community' according to their experiences, what do they expect the most to do with other Chinese students overseas, and what would they contribute to the community if there is one. My interviews continued with two self-initiated associations: the 'Recyclart' in Bruxelles and 'Glass House' in London. During my interviews with them, I mainly focus on how they manage to find a space to settle down and how to maintain the association in terms of their budget and organization.

The theoretical readings will be linked to my questions raised during my field research, especially in understanding the sense of community of the Chinese students abroad. It will lead to a deeper understanding of the community of the Chinese
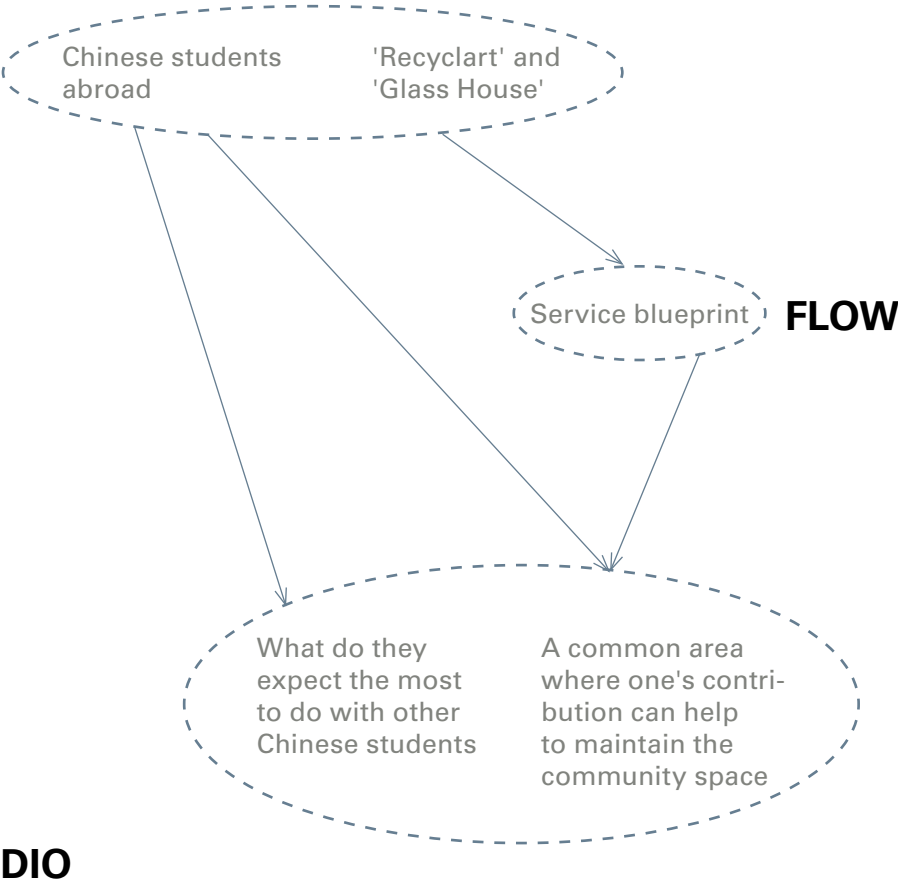
students from a theoretical framework.

My research proceeds with FLOW (guided by Junyuan Chen) and STUDIO (guided by Jurgen Bey).

FLOW will be used as a tool to further understand the work distribution of my visited organisations: the 'Recyclart' and 'Glass House'.

STUDIO will help me to fill my findings from the field research into a design framework, and settle down my role as a designer.

FIELD RESEARCH

Chinese students abroad

'Recyclart' and 'Glass House'

Service blueprint **FLOW**

What do they expect the most to do with other Chinese students

A common area where one's contribution can help to maintain the community space

STUDIO

A COMMUNITY IN A SCHOOL

As for a student, being around his generation can take up most of the school time, which helps to build up a school community. According to Eric Schaps, an education researcher, the sense of community in school can be directly demonstrated by certain feelings of the students about the community, such as the feeling as a family, the willingness for collaborative study, the courage to complain, and the confidence to adjust a communal principle if it is not fair for someone, and so on. [2]

Besides, a positive sense of school community contributes to the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs of students, [3] as argued by Eric Schaps:

"For emotional and physical safety; for close, supportive relationships—a sense of connectedness or belongingness; for autonomy, or a say in what happens to us; and for a sense of competence—a belief that we are capable people and able to learn". [4]

Moreover, a school community may provide opportunities for students to develop habits which have a lasting impact on them, [5] Eric Schaps listed such habits as:

"To be academically motivated, to act ethically and altruistically, to develop social and emotional competencies, and to avoid a number of problem behaviours, including drug use and violence." [6]

As a Chinese student, I consider that the concept of 'school community' by Eric Schaps also exists in Chinese school dormitories.

Firstly, most of the Chinese students choose to live with their peers in a school dormitory, which extends their time of being with the school community. According to a study on the lifestyle of college students in China, approximately 81% of the Chinese students chose to live in a school dormitory in 2020, 70% of which chose to live in the dormitory on campus, [7] and the dormitory condition has been identified as a key factor in Chinese students' decisions about university to attend.

Secondly, the dormitory life connects the students' daily activities, that contributes to an unique sense of 'connectedness' and 'belongingness'. *From 2015 to 2020, I lived with five roommates in a dormitory on the CAFA campus. Living collectively has invited them into my daily activities which I used to do on my own, such as my morning routine, dining, and showering. Most of my memories of that five years have been linked to my roommates, these brought me with a sense of 'connectedness' and 'belongingness' to my dormitory.*

Lastly, the school dormitory can be the first place for millions of Chinese students to form their own social habits. Influenced by the "one child policy", the number of these only-child was estimated to reach 110 million in 2009. [8] Living in a school dormitory creates opportunities for millions of the only-child to develop social habits in their daily life, enabling them to interact under new socializing situations, such as sleeping with peers in the same room, dining with their roommates, showering in a public bathroom, etc.

Image #4

Attending the opening ceremony for all freshmen at CAFA, the second thing I did after my arrival on CAFA campus.

Beijing, 11/09/2015

2 Eric Schaps, 'Creating a School Community', *Educational leadership vol.60,* (2003, No.6), pp31-33
3 Ibid, pp31-33
4 Ibid, pp31-33
5 Ibid, pp31-33
6 Ibid, pp31-33
8 Youth Sight, 'Chinese University Students Lifestyle Survey' *https://tracks.sodexonet.com/files/live/sites/com-cn/files/reports/2020/Final%20Chinese%20version-Youthsight%26Sodexo%20Lifestyle%20China%20report.pdf,* (2020), (In Chinese)
9 G. Z. Wang, 'Estimated structure of the total number of only children in China and future development trends', *Population Research vol.33,* (2009, No.1), pp10-16

...The first thing we did was to check in at our
dormitories, and to meet the people who would
be our roommates for four or five years...

A COMMUNITY IN CHINESE DORMITORIES

In a certain degree, the Chinese school dormitory is successful in providing students with community experiences in their daily lives. However, as I reflected on my own dormitory life at CAFA, I found that the physical conditions of my dormitory could also cause side effects on my life habits, particularly my social habits related to my community life.

To better explicate the details of a typical school dormitory in China, I take my old dormitory at CAFA(2015-2020) as an example.[9] *My dormitory was located in a six-floor building on the campus of CAFA, each floor is equipped with a huge public restroom and a washing machine, but with no kitchens, bathrooms,[10] or public halls for communal activities. Six male students, including me, were accommodated in a box space of around 20m^2, each of us has a small loft bed with a desk, a chair, and a wardrobe beneath. Apart from those, we only had a tiny balcony with a drying rack. Everything was set to be 'just enough', since the price per academic year was set to be 800 Yuan(≈100 Euros), which could be merely 2% of the price to rent a shared room near the CAFA campus in Beijing.*

As shown in the illustration, high residential density is a considerable feature of my dormitory, which reduced personal privacy in my community life and greatly shaped my way of living.

For instance, I often slept with many cushions and quilts tightly covering my body - feeling compressed made me feel safe, and being 'buried' by bedding items 'erased' me from the public sight in dormitory. After I graduated and moved out, even though I live alone and have more space, such behaviours are still the key for me to fall asleep - I am already accustomed to them and consider them as my habits.

Besides, since the daily lives of me and my roommates were inevitably interwoven, the relationship between us were naturally(or doomed to be) more than literally 'roommates' - I would consider it like friends for 'small talks'. In this case, we enjoyed doing daily activities together with easy conversations, but we would not let the topic of conversations cross the boundary of anyone's private domain.

Our physical closeness has instead created a tacit distance between us. This distance was also demonstrated in our practice in Studio 10 - We did enjoy co-developing the Studio 10 as a community space by our spontaneous actions, but the process of developing the Studio 10 did not involve many conversations. Besides, our personal belongings gradually accumulated as barriers, blocking our sights between each other. 'No random chats' has thus became a tacit rule of the Studio 10, and we felt quite comfortable with it.

Even though I define such habits as the side effects of the high density of dormitories, I do not intend to imply any criticism meaning. From my point of view, I rather consider them as my important resources to investigate, supporting my understanding of how this community sense was gradually built up, and how did people in the community generally interact with each other.
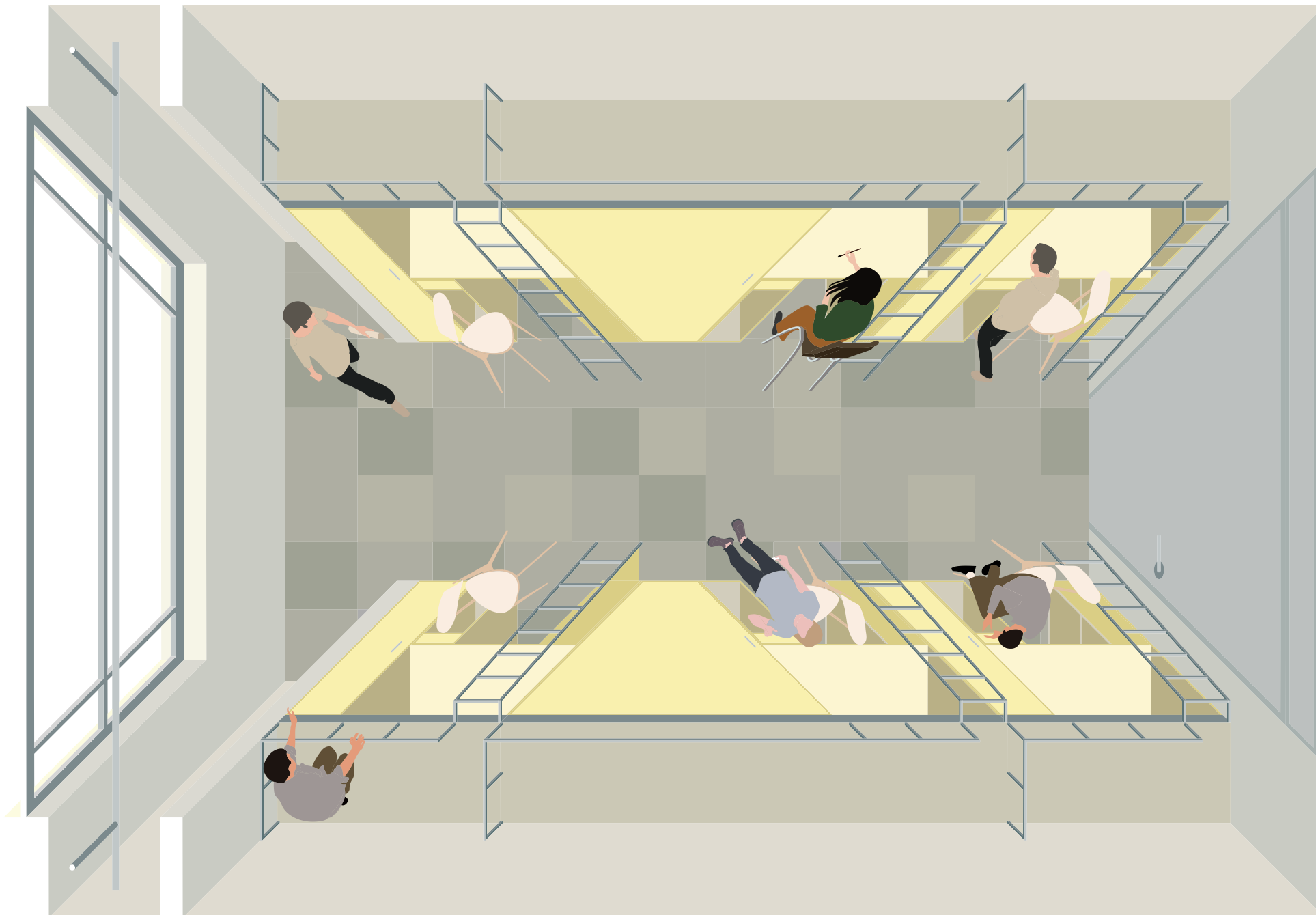

Image #5

A glance of my old dormitory at CAFA.

Beijing, 16/10/2019

9 See the illustration in the hidden layer of the next page
10 *There are independent buildings offering public bathrooms on campus

...And this is an overview of how we lived in it...

In my theoretical readings, I found that such side-effect habits are theoretically reasonable due to the high density of living environments.

According to Zhuoli Tao, professor of epidemiology of psychological problems in adolescents at Southeast University, certain behaviours have been identified as ways to cope with a crowded environment:

"*Increased interpersonal distance, reduced eye contact, decreased effort to initiate conversations, and an increased preference to be left alone*,"[11]

It actually offers an insight view of the relationship between us in the dormitory at CAFA, which I would call as - 'the estrangement of hearts merged with the physical closeness' - *we spent nearly 12 hours together per day in the tiny dormitory, but our relationship somehow was not as close as our physical interactions. Besides, our interactions were quite spontaneous, and highly relied on our daily activities, initiating talks or proposing other activities were not common to see.*

In addition, those strategies dealing with high residential density are suggested to persist even if the dense living condition no longer exists, as Zhuoli Tao described, they become "over-generalized" in one's life.[12] It explained why I still fall asleep following my old habit from dormitory. However, I would not say that such 'over-generalized' habits are always detrimental, as Eric Schaps argued, the beneficial habits developed in school communities also tend to be lasting for students in their future life.[13]

In understanding the sense of community of Chinese students, such habits developed in school communities are a very important clue. My sense of community began with co-doing daily activities in a

dormitory, and was further refined by co-developing the Studio 10. In both of the cases, the sense of community was mainly built up by our random daily interactions, hardly by any forms of teamwork with a leader and hardly by any forms of deliberate talks.

Therefore, I believe that this sense of community is heavily reliant on the collective actions of the participants, and such interactions mostly happen on a random basis, rather than being pushed to happen with force.

Image #6

In my first project at KABK, I used a pillow and a quilt to squeeze my body, to feel mentally safe while working in public.

Den Haag, 09/11/2020

11 Z.L. Tao, G. Wu, Z.Y. Wang, 'The relationship between high residential density in student dormitories and anxiety, binge eating and Internet addiction: a study of Chinese college students', *SpringerPlus vol.5* (2016), pp1579-1586
12 Ibid, pp1579-1586
13 Eric Schaps, 'Creating a School Community', *Educational leadership vol.60,* (2003, No.6)*,* pp31-33

...Until now I realised, that my habits of sleeping in my old dormitory might have played a part in leading to this result...

A COMMUNITY BASED ON CULTURAL INTIMACY

In the summer of 2020, I came to the Netherlands to pursue a Master's degree, and started to approach the group of Chinese students abroad.

According to Statista, the number of Chinese students who went abroad to study has increased for ten years in a row, reaching around 703,500 in 2019.[14] The number of Chinese students who enrolled in Dutch higher education in the 2018/'19 academic year was reported to be 4,475, making China the third country of origin among all international students in the Netherlands.[15] While in the UK, this number was reported to have reached 120,385 in the same year, making China the top sending country for international students.[16]

My desire for a broader horizon and intercultural experience drove my decision to study abroad. But after one year in the Netherlands, my social circle became increasingly limited to Chinese students. In an article researching what mainland Chinese parents and students consider as important for an overseas study destination, the students sampled ranked "international/intercultural experiences"[17] as the second important factor. However, according to Adrian Scarlett, the founding director at International Education Today, the fact is that:

"Often Chinese students end up interacting almost exclusively with other Chinese students despite living overseas".[18]

It is interesting to see such a seemingly paradox between Chinese students' enthusiasm for intercultural experiences and their exclusive interactions, because both of them are evidenced in my own case. Thus, I take this paradox as a phenomenon to investigate. I primarily concentrate on my curiosity as:

What is the reason that drive Chinese students abroad long for international/intercultural experiences but meanwhile (almost) exclusively interact with other Chinese students?

To answer this question, I think the term 'cultural intimacy' can be an important factor. According to Jelena Subotic, a political scientist, the term 'cultural intimacy' is explicated as:

In the field of anthropology, the concept of cultural intimacy expresses those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of international criticism for the state, but are nevertheless used to provide insiders with a sense of national comfort, understanding, and self-reflexive, ontological security.[19]

By referring the concept of 'cultural intimacy', what I actually want to stress is the later part of Subotic's explication: cultural intimacy proves a safe haven for its 'insiders', in terms of 'a sense of national comfort, understanding, and self-reflexive, ontological security.'

Relating to the Chinese students abroad, I noticed that the concept of cultural intimacy indeed functions as a comfort zone in many national aspects, such as the Chinese language, the Chinese appetite, the Chinese moral values, even the Chinese ideology.

Image #7

Dining around a hot pot can be a classic way to socialise with others in China. I have also thought about maybe trying the hot pot with people from other countries, but finally I gave up on this option, because a hot pot meal is usually quite spicy and is not vegetarian friendly, the smell could even last in your room and cloths for days...

Delft, 29/10/2021

14 Statista, 'Number of students from China going abroad for study from 2009 to 2019', *https://www.statista.com/statistics/227240/number-of-chinese-students-that-study-abroad/,* (2021)
15 Statistics Netherlands(CBS), 'Relatively many Chinese restaurant workers and students', *https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb/news/2020/26/relatively-many-chinese-restaurant-workers-and-students,* (2020)
16 Universities UK, 'International Facts and Figures 2020', *https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/universities-uk-international/insights-and-publications/uuki-publications/international-facts-and-figures-2020,* (2020)
17 Peter Bodycott, 'Choosing a higher education study abroad destination', *Journal of Research in International Education*, vol.8, (2009, No.3), pp.349-373
18 Adrian Scarlett, 'Why Chinese students choose to study overseas?' *https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/why-chinese-students-choose-study-overseas-adrian-scarlett/,* (2019)
19 Jelena Subotic, Ayse Zarakol, Cultural intimacy in International Relations, *'European Journal of International Relations'*, vol 19, (2012, No.4) pp.915–938

...Sharing food from one plate is quite common
for Chinese cuisines, but in other cultures
maybe it is not. Sometimes I unconsciously put
myself in a weird social situation at table, so
I gradually became afraid to dine with people
from other cultures...

For example, if Chinese students abroad face social isolation, the cultural intimacy offers a safe haven for them to meet their social needs. As Kun Yan, an associate professor at Tsinghua University's Institute of Education, mentioned in her research article:

"Chinese students abroad may have feelings of being social isolated, this could be caused by their language weakness and confusion about how to behave properly in social situations. [...] It leads to a fact that they tend to rely on their co-nationals to meet social needs."[20]

In my interview with S. He, a master student in Non Linear Narrative at KABK, he also gave an example from his experience:

"There is still something that you can only share with Chinese people, like when you feel confused because of the culture of another country, [...] sometimes foreigners really are not able to understand the Chinese' perspectives. Likewise, I cannot understand theirs either."[21]

Moreover, the Chinese language also plays a vital role in the forming the cultural intimacy among the Chinese students abroad. According to Cynthia Slagter, professor in the Languages department at Calvin University, speaking a non-native language (even with co-national peers) while studying abroad fails to meet students' emotional needs.[22] It is evidenced in my experience, almost every time I hear other Chinese people speak English, I can easily grasp their points of view, but I cannot determine their emotion unless they express it explicitly. In a Chinese-speaking situation, straightforward expressions of emotion are often discouraged, which makes it even harder for the Chinese students abroad to express emotion in other languages. As Yan mentioned,

the Chinese students in her study indicated that:

"The emotional needs were best met by interacting with their co-nationals, instead of the people from the host country".[23]

The cultural intimacy is unquestionably not only confined to social and emotional aspects, but these were the two that I longed the most during my study period in the Netherlands.

After 15 months of living here, the need for social and emotional satisfaction attracted me to interact with other Chinese students more frequently. From 14/12/2021 till 14/01/2022, I stayed in London for an entire month. I found it quite easy to approach the local Chinese students, since the number of the Chinese students there was much higher than that in the Netherlands.

I enjoyed my life there with easy access to other Chinese people, and I felt a sense of community sprouting from the cultural intimacy between us. However, in my talking with other Chinese students abroad, all of them have mentioned that it was quite challenging to find a space for collective activities with their Chinese friends. As mentioned before, I believe that the sense of community among the Chinese students is very much based on their collective activities on a random basis, then a lack of a regular gathering space could be a fatal limitation to the development of this community. Thus, I stepped on a journey in search of two questions:

What do the Chinese students abroad expect to do in a community space?

Is it possible to find a regular gathering space for this community? What roles are needed in maintaining the community?

Image #8

I had dinner with four Chinese friends on New Year's Eve. We rented an apartment from a Dutch family only for this night to have a gathering. All the food was from delivery, because we did not have much time for cooking. But of course, only one night was deadly ephemeral for all the thing we wanted to do...

Amsterdam, 31/12/2021

20 Yan, K., & Berliner, D. C, 'Chinese international students personal and sociocultural stressors in the United States', *Journal of College Student Development*, vol.54, (2013, No.1), pp62-84
21 Interview #1 with S. He, 01/12/2021
22 Cynthia Slagter, Marcie J. Pyper, 'Linguistic Loneliness and Study Abroad', *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, vol.31, (2019, issue 1), pp46-58
23 Yan, K., & Berliner, D. C, 'Chinese international students personal and sociocultural stressors in the United States', *Journal of College Student Development*, vol.54, (2013, No.1), pp62-84

...We made bubble tea and played games on Switch, all of these brought me back to the summer before I came to the Netherlands. This little gathering was very much nice, but no one knows when and where and with whom the next gathering will be...

"WHAT DO YOU EXPECT TO DO IN A COMMUNITY?"

In order to better understand what the Chinese students abroad expect to do in a community space, I conducted ten interviews and fortunately gained permissions to share their stories in my thesis. The 10 people I interviewed are Chinese students aging from 22 to 32, mostly based in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

Prior to the interviews, I would start the conversation by simply asking for their former experience in living in a dormitory with others, and gradually shift towards their future prospect for a communal space abroad. In the process, the conversation will be navigated through three topics:

"What was the condition of your former dormitory? Did it affect your life habits?"

"What kind of space do you live after you moved out from your dormitory? Do you still keep the habits from your former dormitory?"

"What is the most satisfactory activity you had or expect to have with other Chinese students abroad? How does the scenario look like?"

For the results, my main concern is the last question. I divided my interviewees into three groups according to their answers to the last question. The first two questions are set to support my understanding for the answers of the last question.

Image #9

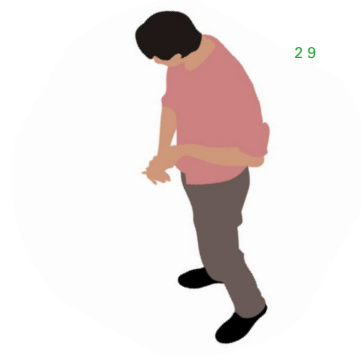Approaching the Chinatown in London

London, 15/07/2021

24
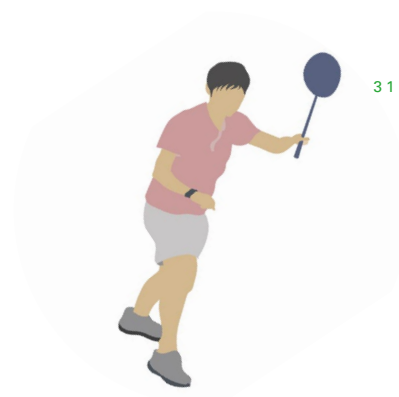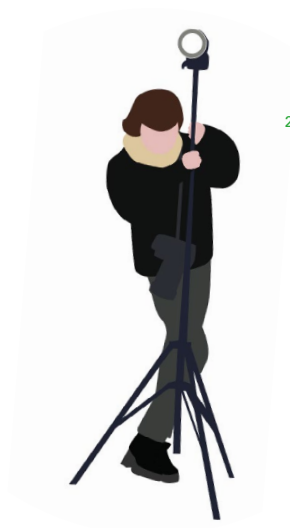25
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24 C. Men, Ph.D. candidate at Queen Mary University of London
25 Q. Yu, Master student at Central Academy of Fine Arts
26 J. Li, Master student at Glasgow University
27 Y. Gongsun, Art critic, founder of the podcast 'Buzhu'
28 R. Lu, Bachelor student at Koninklijke Academie van Beeldende Kunsten

29 S. He, Master student at Koninklijke Academie van Beeldende Kunsten
30 S. Shi, Freelancer artist, designer
31 Q. Li, Ph.D. candidate at Queen Mary University of London
32 S. Zheng, Graduate of Royal College of Art
33 J. Wang, Bachelor student at Koninklijke Academie van Beeldende Kunsten

I Would Like To Have A Talk

The first group of my interviewees includes J. Wang, Y. Gongsun and C. Men. They all mentioned that having a talk is what they expected the most in a community space.

In my conversations with them, they all expressed an interest in having in-depth conversations with other Chinese friends, but they all agreed that it would be better if the conversations happened randomly while they were doing something else, because normally they would not invite other people just for a talk.

> *C. Men, for example, mentioned that he usually has deep conversations with a friend in a cafeteria during lunch breaks, and such conversations could unconsciously last for hours. But he rather starts with a cup of coffee and let the conversation spontaneously occur, instead of inviting his friend for a conversation. As he said: "a deliberate invitation for talks makes himself awkward."*

Image #10

A talk with J. Wang and S. Qian at Qian's place.

Den Haag, 15/10/2021

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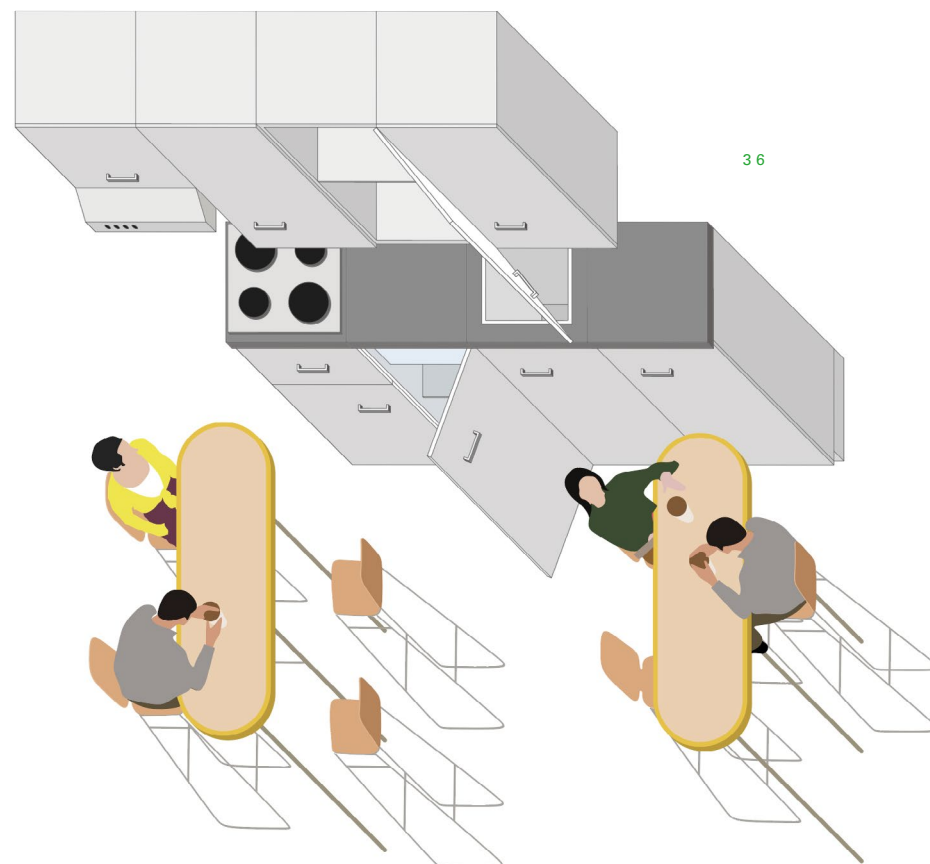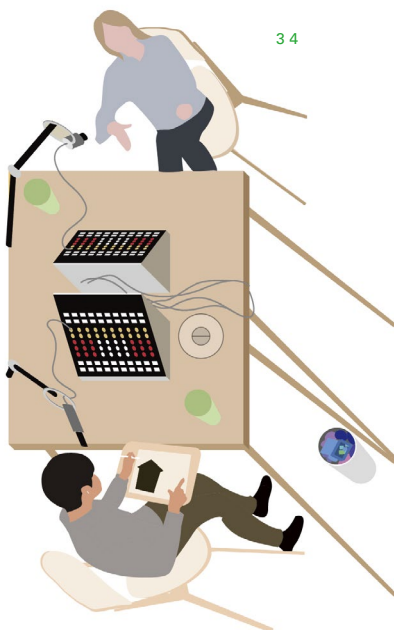
34 The expected activity of Y. Gongsun
35 The expected activity of J. Wang

36 The expected activity of C. Men

I Would Like To Rent A Studio

The second group includes my interviewee, J. Li and some of my observations of the Chinese students abroad. This group, based on what I have learned about them, expects to build up relationships with the Chinese community through various forms of trading.

For example, I've noticed that Chinese students studying in Europe frequently travel between countries within the Schengen area, and they normally seek assistance from the local-based Chinese students, in terms of renting temporary housing or seeking travel advice. Besides, among my Chinese friends in the Netherlands who work in the design or art fields, co-renting a working studio is also a popular option. Furthermore, one of my friends, J. Li, has purchased a car in the United Kingdom and has offered airport pick-up on occasion for money:

"Since my Chinese driving license will be valid for one year in the United Kingdom, and my study period is pretty much the same, so why not buy a car?" He plans to sell the car after graduation, and he claims that purchasing the car will not change his budget that much, thanks to the money he earned and saved by not taking public transportation to travel.
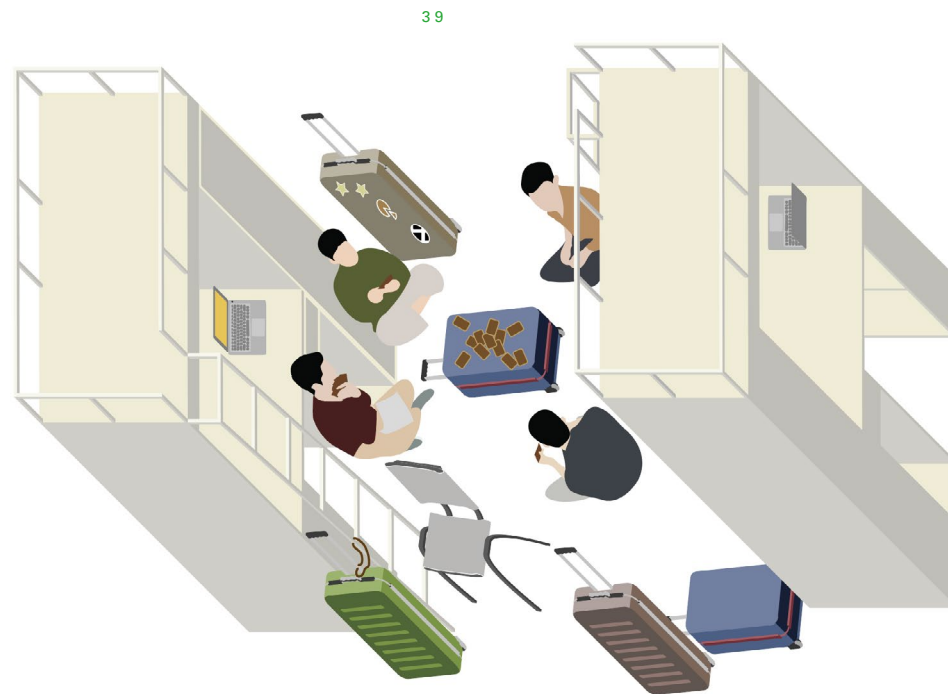

Image #11

This Chinese shop in London offers delivery service from China to London. The price is widely acceptable (≈5 Euro/1 kg), and normally the package will arrive within one week. For some of my interviewees, it almost becomes their only option to purchase products apart from food ingredients.

London, 05/01/2022
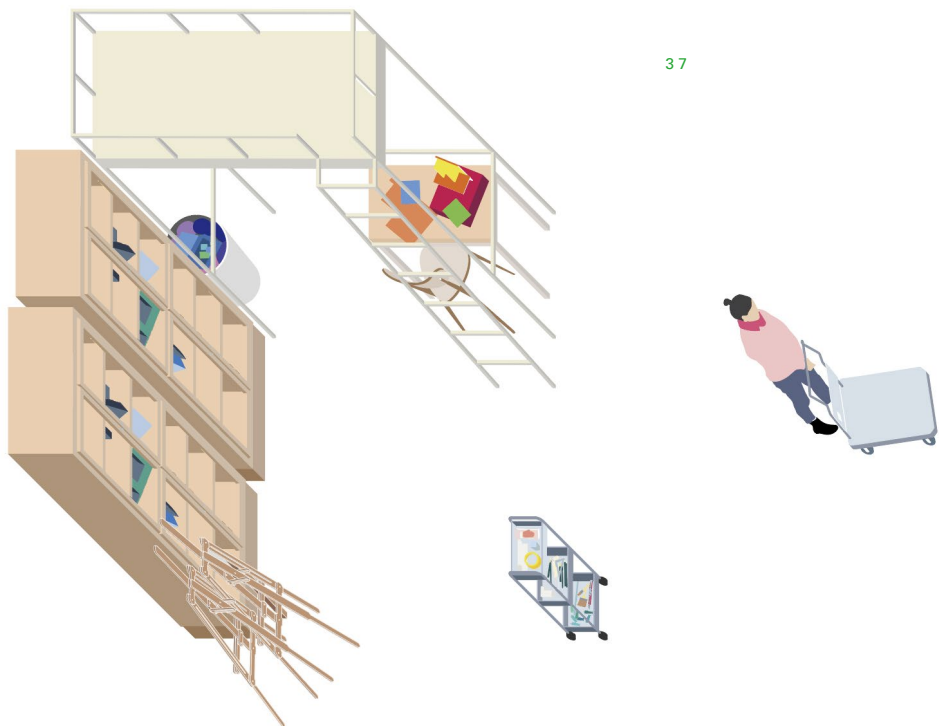
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37 The expected space from my observation: a working studio
38 The expected activity of J. Li

39 The expected space from my observation: a temporary living place

I Would Like To Go To Karaoke

The last group of my interviewees includes S. He, Q. Li, Q. Yu, R. Lu, S. Shi and S. Zheng. They all mentioned that co-doing certain activities with others is what they expect the most in a community.

Their expected activities vary from person to person, including playing ping-pong, making dumplings, karaoke and playing board games. During my conversations with them, I noticed that most of them would like to be the ones who are invited to participate in those activities, rather than the one who organises and sends out invitations.

R. Lu, when talking about her most satisfactory activity with Chinese students abroad, she highlighted the power of 'making': "I enjoyed the last time that I did my photography project with you and S. Qian, because we just gathered and started making, without extra words, I like such hands-on activities that bond people in actions, but I am too lazy to gather people - if someone calls me for that, I will come, but I'm not going to organise it."

Besides, most of them mentioned that they lack enough spaces for their expected collective activities.

S. He, as he said, "suffered from the collective living in dormitories for almost 14 years", so naturally he regards his own living space in a rented studio as a non-social space. He enjoys collective activities like Karaoke, but he prefers to let them happen in somewhere else, rather than his living space. However, finding a public place suitable for Karaoke in the Netherlands is not as easy as it is in China.
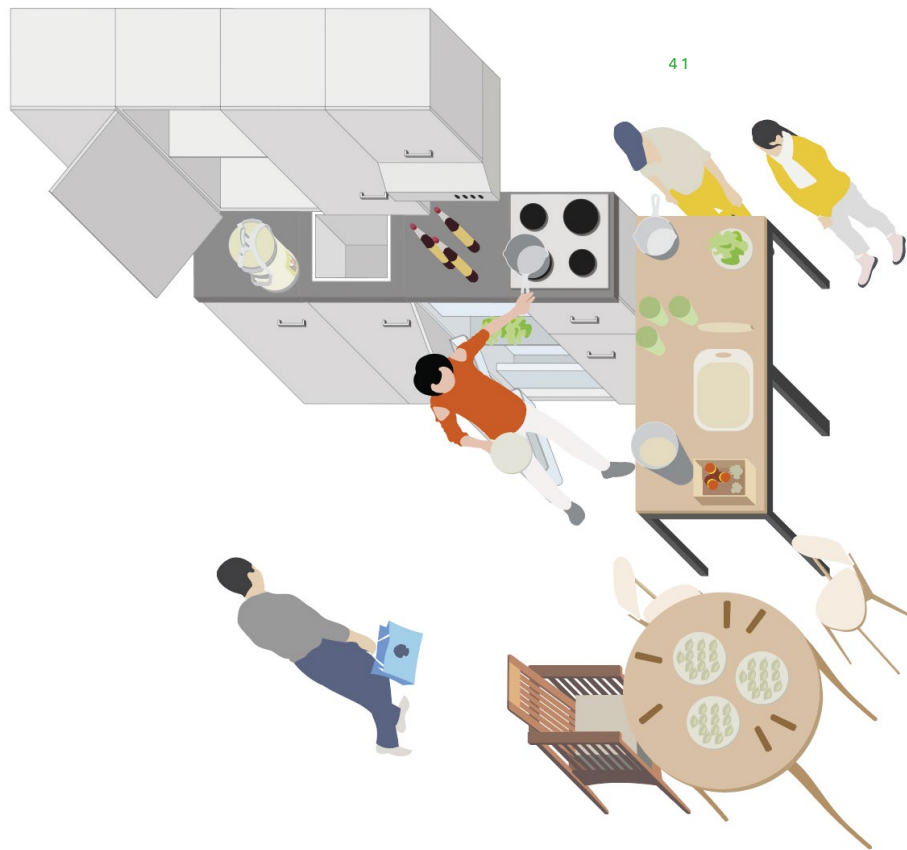

Image #12

A Karaoke in a living room of a rented house. S. He liked it, and I also thought that it was nice in general, but it was crowded since the layout of this living room was obviously not designed for such a twenty-person activity. Besides, it was a bit odd to see a Karaoke being held in a domestic environment...

Den Haag, 20/11/2021

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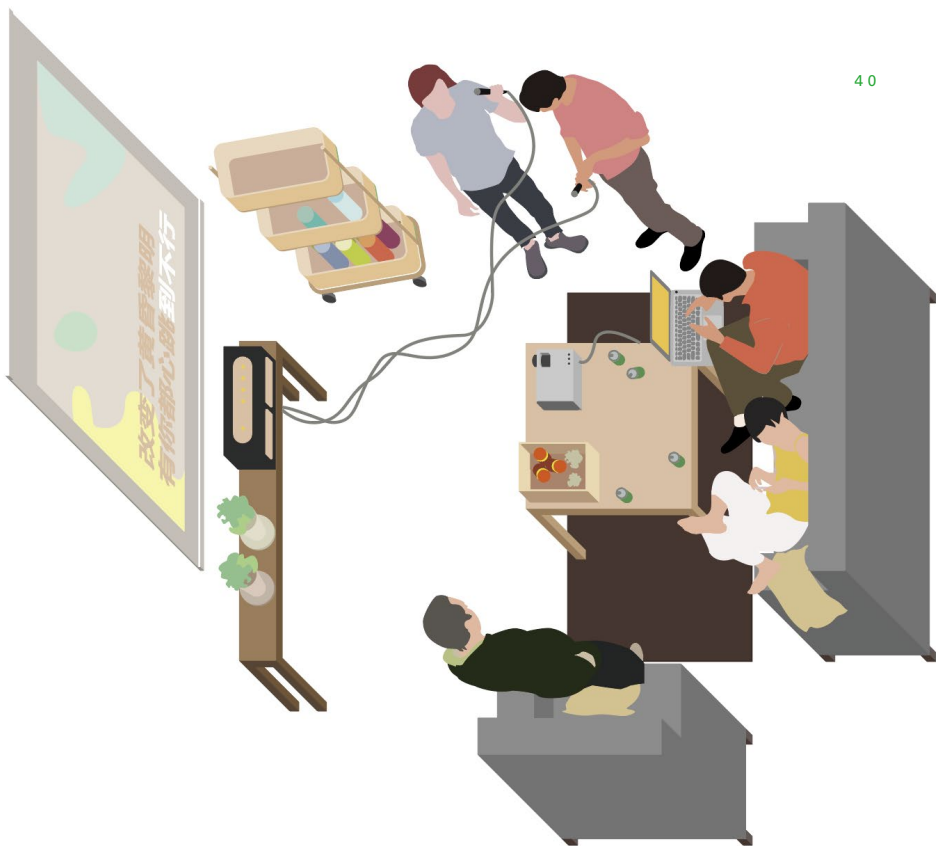
40 The expected activity of S. He

41 The expected activity of S. Shi and S. Zheng
42 The expected activity of Q. Yu

A Summary Of The Expected Activities

After ten interviews with other Chinese students abroad, I had a deeper understanding of features of the activities that my interviewees expect to do in a community.

To begin with, the activities are diverse. I roughly divided them into three categories: talking based, trading based, and co-doing based. The numbers of activities in each category show that co-doing-based activities are the most wanted, and such activities typically take up more space than others. Besides, these co-doing based activities are rarely appropriate for a domestic setting, making them difficult to take place in someone's home.

In addition, lacking of motivation to invite others for these collective activities is also quite considerable in my interviews. Eight of my interviewees preferred to be invitees, with only two willing to be the ones who send invitations.
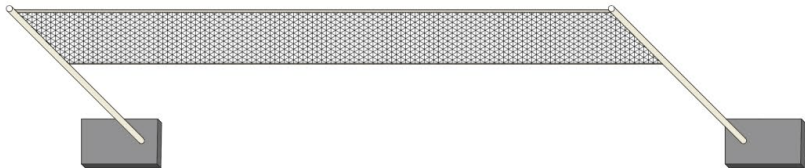

Image #13

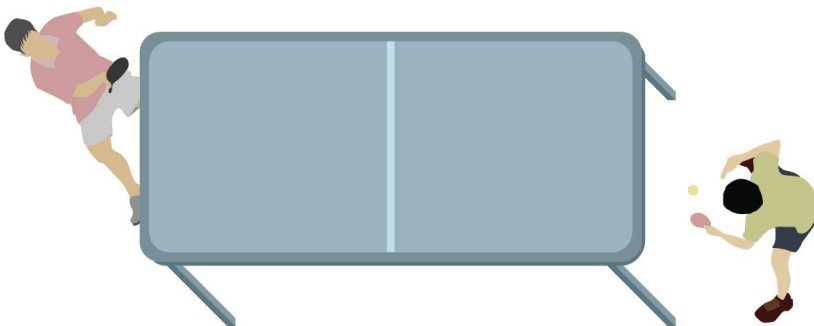A project of R. Lu brought three of us together.

Den Haag, 20/11/2021

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"WHAT IS YOUR ROLE IN YOUR COMMUNITY?"

In response to the question I came up before:

Is it possible to find a regular gathering space for this community? What roles are needed in maintaining the community?

I had conducted two interviews to the 'Recyclart' in Bruxelles and the 'Glass House' in London.

The 'Recyclart' was initiated by designers and artists at the Brussels-Chapelle train station in 2000 and re-developed in Molenbeek street in 2018. Their current home base is an abandoned paper factory based on a special contract with the local authority, which allows to use the factory for free. This special land use contract is a result of negotiation between the self-initiated associations such as the Recyclart and the local authority. [46] In its website, 'Recyclart' describes itself as

"A multidisciplinary structure composed of an ARTS CENTRE and two socio-professional integration projects, which are the RECYCLART BAR (a 100% vegan + 100% organic bar/restaurant) and the RECYCLART FABRIK (wood/metal/workshops)". [47]

In its practice, 'Recyclart' has built a sustainable relationship with the local society, by offering music event, furniture repair, vegan meals, exhibitions and lectures. Besides, 'Recyclart' mostly recruits low-skilled people, provides necessary trainings to them, and associates with the local Socio-Professional Integration Program to offer them job opportunities. In addition, the 'Recyclart' also gets funding from the local art foundation, which can cover around half of its budget.

The 'Glass House' describes itself as:

"An exciting new LGBTQIA+ multidisciplinary venue. [48] *Its*
three spaces, Common Press (bookshop café), The Commons (multimedia events space) and Common Counter (bar) offer a hub for London's diverse creative and community to thrive". [49]

The 'Glass House' aims to provide the sexual minority groups in London with various activities, such as music events, bar, bookshop, cafe, and podcast studios that can be rented. Different from the 'Recyclart', the 'Glass House' does not rely on any funding, their earnings are enough to cover all their expenses, including their rent near central London.

With these two examples, I found it possible to have a regular gathering space for a community. The ways to deal with the territory use policy are flexible, and I noticed multiple ways to get financial support from the society, in terms of funding, donates and even incomes from cafeterias and book stores.

Image #14

A glance of the Bar Resto of the Recyclart

Bruxelles, 14/10/2021

46 Gabriela Galindo, Filling in the void: The rise of 'legalised squats' in Brussels, https://www.brussels-times.com/brussels-2/127341/filling-in-the-void-the-rise-of-legalised-squats-in-brussels, (18/08/2020)
47 Recyclart, 'Recyclart Info', http://www.recyclart.be/fr/a-propos-de-recyclart/info, (in French, translated by DeepL)
48 Glass House, front-page, https://glasshouse.london/
49 Ibid

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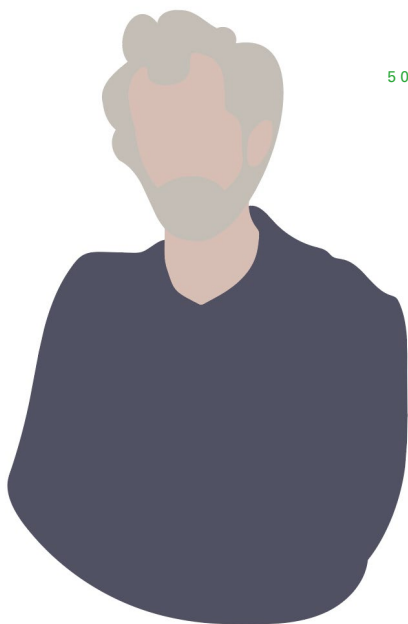
50 A guy working at 'Bar Resto' of 'Recyclart'

51 A guy working at 'Common Counter' of 'Glass House'

An Attempt to De-construct A Music Event

Realising the possibility to have a gathering space for a community is only the first step.

I continue to focus on how the people(or as staffs) in 'Recyclart' and 'Glass House' actually interact with each other, and how they offer service for their customers. I used the 'Service Blueprint Map' (instructed by Junyuan Chen) as an analysing tool to visually show the relationships within the community and between the community and their customers. 'Service Blueprint Map' is described in Wikipedia as "an applied process chart which shows the service delivery process from the customer's perspective". [52]

Since the 'Recyclart' and 'Glass House' both organise music events together with food served from bars, I take a music event with food supply and a bar as two case studies to investigate in.

In my researching in these two case studies, I would highlight three important factors that do not show up onstage: the social media, the bar component and the suppliers.

Firstly, in both of the cases, the social media may serve as a main (or the only) method to advertise the music event and the bar service.

Nearby the home base of the 'Recyclart', I did not see any information advertising their upcoming music events or bar service until I clicked into their websites and Instagram accounts.

In my interview with a guy working at the bar of the 'Glass House', he clearly indicated that they mainly advertise themselves via social media, especially through instagram.

Secondly, I used the term 'bar component' instead of just 'bar', because I found that in both of the cases they actually did not regard their bars as an independent service branch, but rather a supply station that could be combined with all the other services, such as music events, exhibitions and bookstores.

When I visited the 'Recyclart', I found that their kitchen was in the centre of the entire home base, the kitchen connected their different spaces, such as the event space, lecture space and restaurant space. This layout make it possible to have food or drink supply during other activities. Therefore I rather consider their bar service as a flexible component instead of an independent branch as described on their website - 'Bar Resto'.

Lastly, in these two cases, the suppliers include musicians, social programs that offer trainings to cooks and food suppliers.

Before I dived into the whole process of organising a music event and maintaining a bar, I did not realised the importance of such suppliers. In my interviews at both 'Recyclart' and 'Glass House', I found these two communities both had stable collaborations with the local food suppliers and social programs that provide trainings to cooks. Only the musicians' participation will remain on a random basis, but as the guy working in the 'Glass House' said, "normally we don't worry about that, they will pop up for collaborations".

Overall, these three crucial factors are not visible in the process of a music event or a bar, but it does not negate their significance. On the contrary, I believe they are essential in clarifying roles for community members and connecting them with customers outside the community.
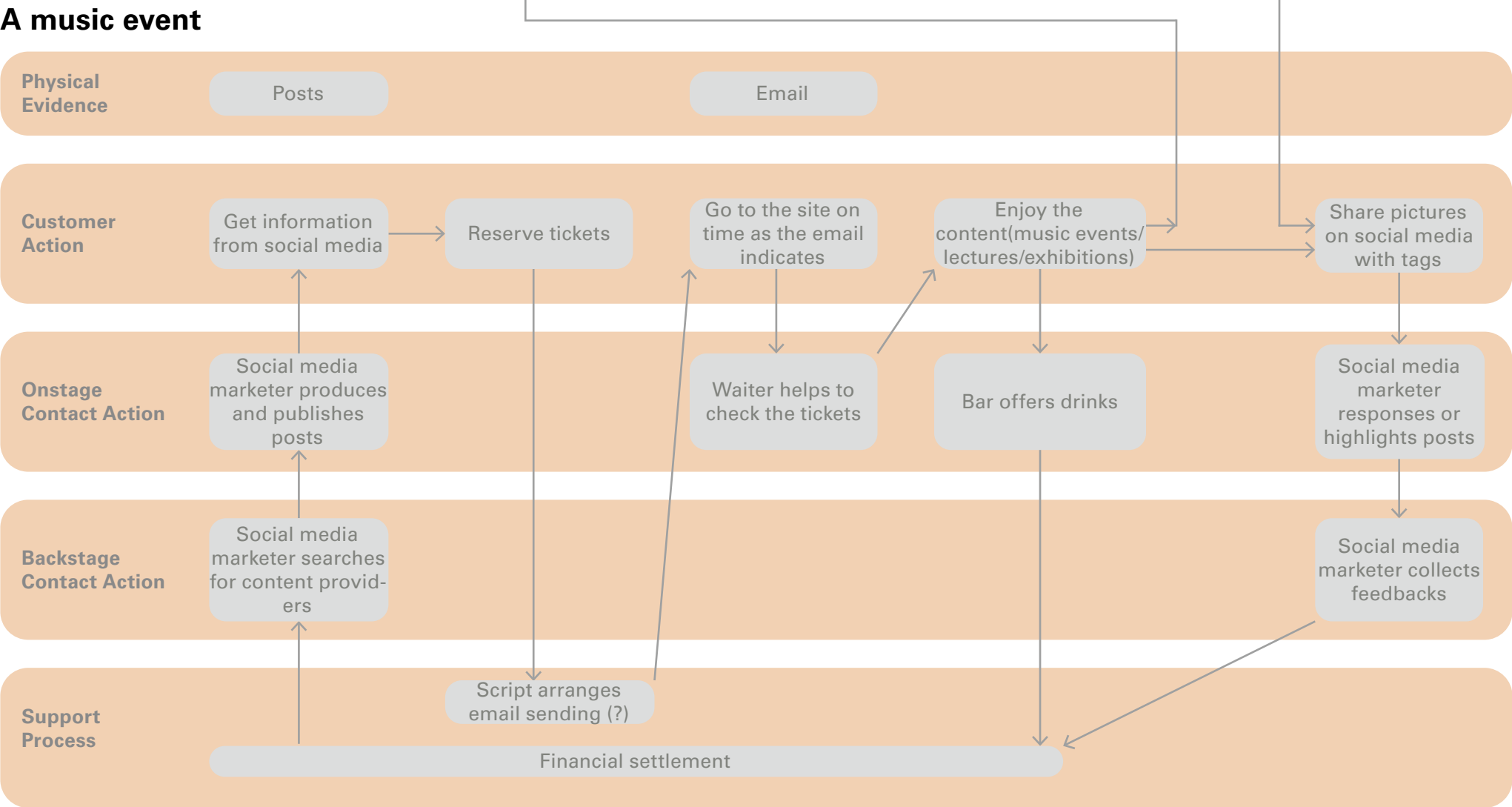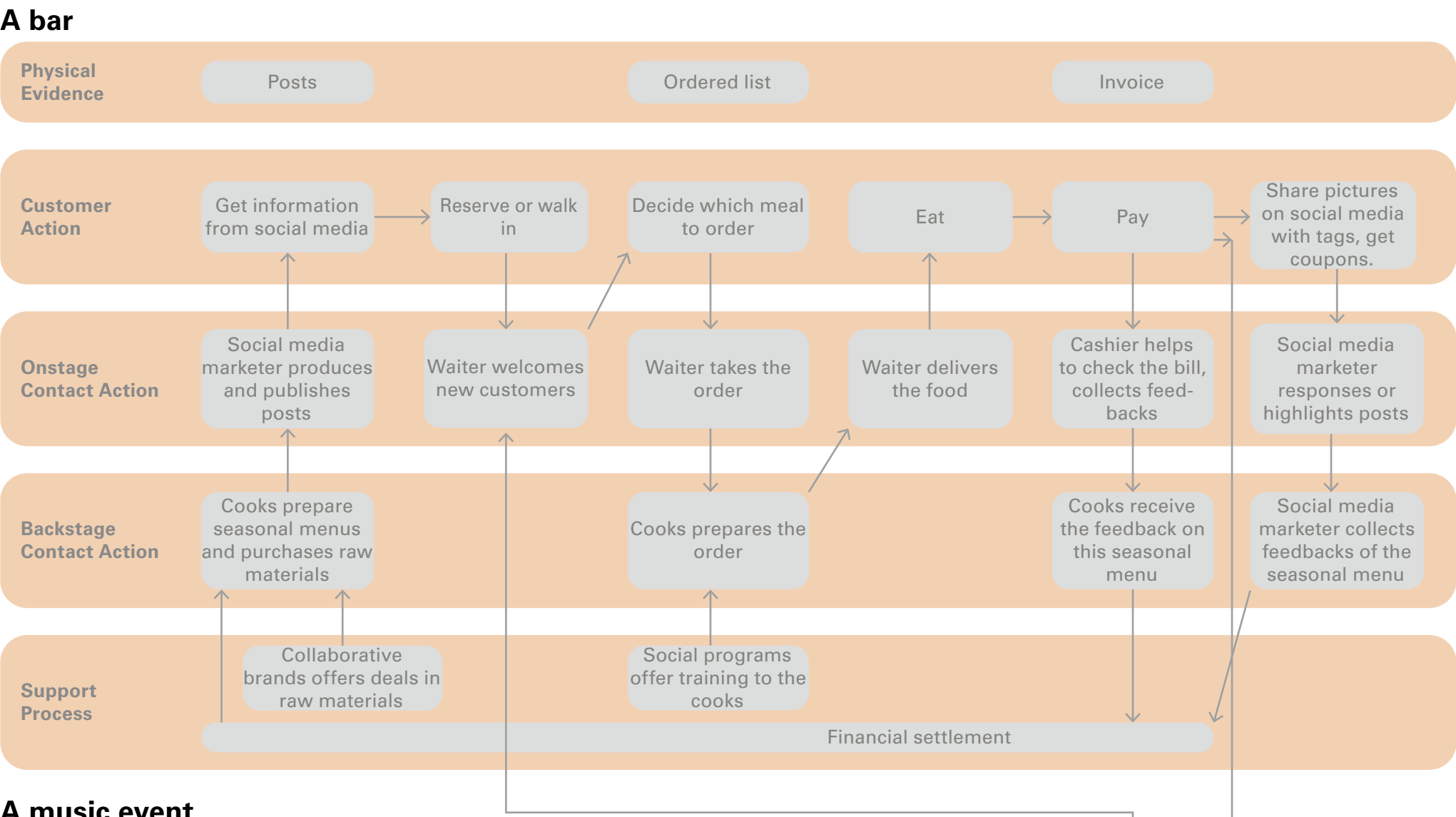

Image #15

A glance of the Common Press of the Glass House

London, 13/1/2022

52 Wikipedia, 'Service blueprint', https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Service_blueprint

A bar

Physical Evidence		Posts		Ordered list		Invoice	

Customer Action

Get information from social media → Reserve or walk in → Decide which meal to order | Eat → Pay → Share pictures on social media with tags, get coupons.

Onstage Contact Action

Social media marketer produces and publishes posts | Waiter welcomes new customers | Waiter takes the order | Waiter delivers the food | Cashier helps to check the bill, collects feedbacks | Social media marketer responses or highlights posts

Backstage Contact Action

Cooks prepare seasonal menus and purchases raw materials | Cooks prepares the order | Cooks receive the feedback on this seasonal menu | Social media marketer collects feedbacks of the seasonal menu

Support Process

Collaborative brands offers deals in raw materials | Social programs offer training to the cooks

Financial settlement

A music event

Physical Evidence		Posts		Email	

Customer Action

Get information from social media → Reserve tickets | Go to the site on time as the email indicates | Enjoy the content(music events/lectures/exhibitions) → Share pictures on social media with tags

Onstage Contact Action

Social media marketer produces and publishes posts | Waiter helps to check the tickets | Bar offers drinks | Social media marketer responses or highlights posts

Backstage Contact Action

Social media marketer searches for content providers | Social media marketer collects feedbacks

Support Process

Script arranges email sending (?)

Financial settlement

LAYERS OF ME

I am putting down these notes again like the beginning, hoping to have a thorough reflection on what my interests are, which position I can take to interfere my research findings as a spatial designer.

03/02/2022---

The role of a designer has been discussed a lot, that is also what I have been struggling with since I graduated from CAFA.

My bachelor's focus was in between an architect and an interior designer, so my concentrate used to be very much within the discipline: architectures, interior objects, shapes, colours, materials, lights and shadows...After my arriving in the Netherlands, my interest switched to things related to humans: their ethnicities, languages, habits, traditions, happiness and hatred...

I like stalking people, so as my design. I am fascinated about how people could be (like), which also reflected in my projects at KABK, all of them were like containers, no matter in shapes or concepts, the contents they contained showed how I imagined I could be or others could be.

I enjoy knowing people inside out, how they gather information, how they decide, so I like being with people, having random talks, but not too close. I miss the time in Studio 10 at CAFA, which is also like a prototype seducing me to do this project.

As a spatial designer, which already sounds very much like a cliché to me, I am well aware of this role's limitations in interfering in the real world, especially when my topic deals with building a community. I tried to consider this graduation project as a practical matter, then I found endless practical issues waiting to be solved and endless accidents that could happen.

Besides, I also doubt the actual functionality of the rising ambition in the design industry. I was successively educated that design should be able to solve practical issues, as well as reflecting the designers' personal values, which I agree on both, but in my case, sometimes I was trapped in my obsessiveness to satisfy both sides, and the outcome might be an awkward hybrid. In other words, for a practical design project, I worry about that the ambition of designers may misjudge the real situation, creating unnecessary design tasks.

At this point, since this project starts from my ambition - my pursue for a community abroad like the Studio 10, I see the aim of this design as more poetic expression than offering a practical solution. That is also the reason why I define my project as an experiment on a communal space for the Chinese students abroad.
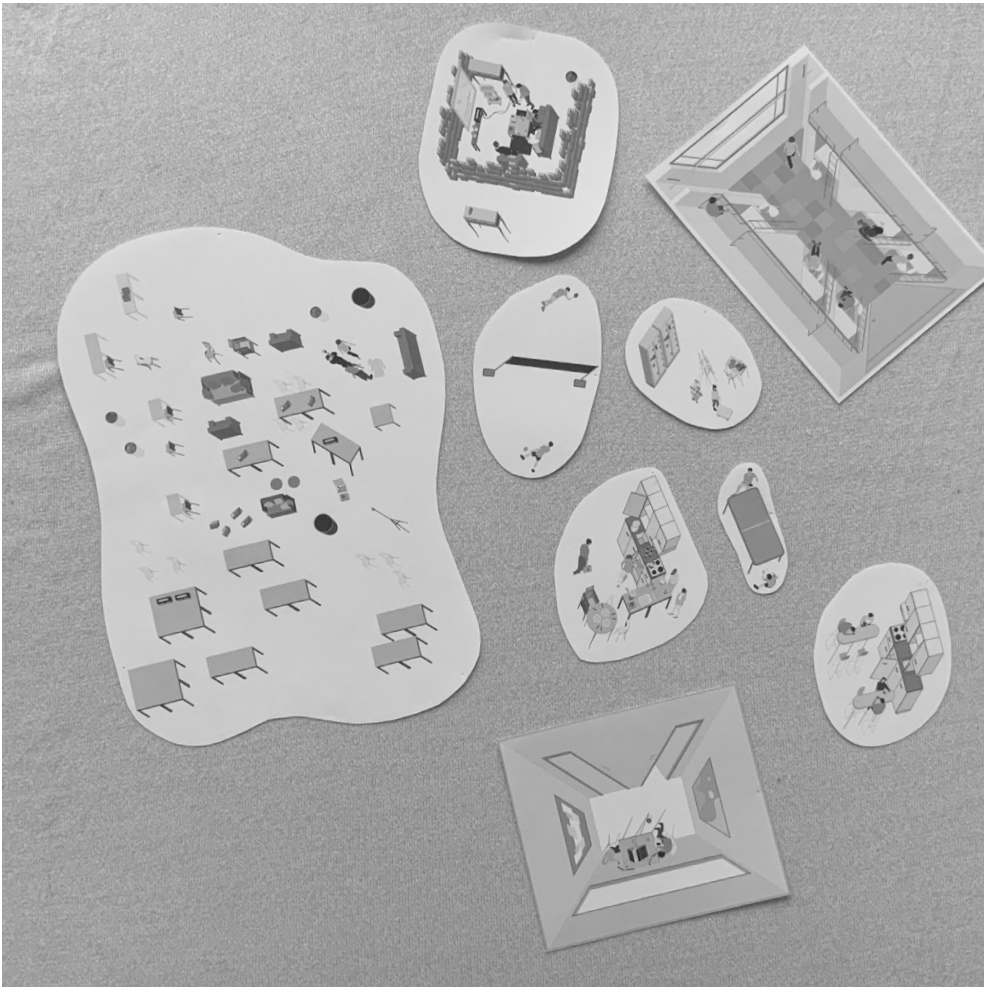

Image #16

My research findings end up as my toy.

My Imagination Den, 15/02/2022

...and let's see how will this community develop
if I put all of them together in a fictional space
like this.

CONCLUSION

My research started from my personal experiences of being with the Chinese student community under different spatial conditions. I delved into the features of the community, and explored how these features interacted with different spatial conditions. Since this community began under a dense living condition in a dormitory, co-doing daily activities at random has become a fundamental way for me to interact with my roommates, and it has thus caused this community very much relied on the collectivity and randomness of activities. These two features of the community got further evidenced in the spatial practice of Studio 10, co-developing the space has replaced co-doing daily activities as the fundamental way for me and my classmates to interact with each other. In the Netherlands, this community has become less connected due to a lack of space that allows the Chinese students abroad to hold activities in a collective and random manner.

In my field research, I conducted ten interviews with Chinese students abroad, enquiring their expected activity types. I categorised these activities and found that most of them still follow the features of collectivity and randomness. Furthermore, I paid visits to 'Recyclart' in Bruxelles and 'Glass House' in London, in order to gain more practical experiences of what kind of space can be used as a home base for a community. I used the service blueprint map to de-construct a music event and a bar, for better understanding who are involved in these two communities and how their spatial arrangements reflect on their organisations.

In the design phase, I believe there is still a lot to investigate from the Chinese students abroad. My aim of this project is to conceive a scenario showing what they can accomplish in terms of building a community, but before the design phase starts, I believe there is still a lot to consider in refining this scenario.

In the aspect of culture, this scenario does not aim to build a barrier against the people from other cultures. All those cultural activities in this scenario could also be inter-cultural, allowing people from other cultures to join.

In the aspect of economy, this scenario should relate to the economic factors of the host country. For example, if the scenario happens in an abandoned factory, then attention should be paid to the policies relating to how to apply for use legally and financially.

Much more to consider and much more to put down. In conceiving the scenario for the Chinese students abroad, I also grew a concern about all the international students who may face the challenge of loosing their sense of community. It is a global issue, this project is obviously not enough to offer a solution, but I wish it could be a source of inspiration for others, and a chance to raise awareness for the international students' lives in another country.
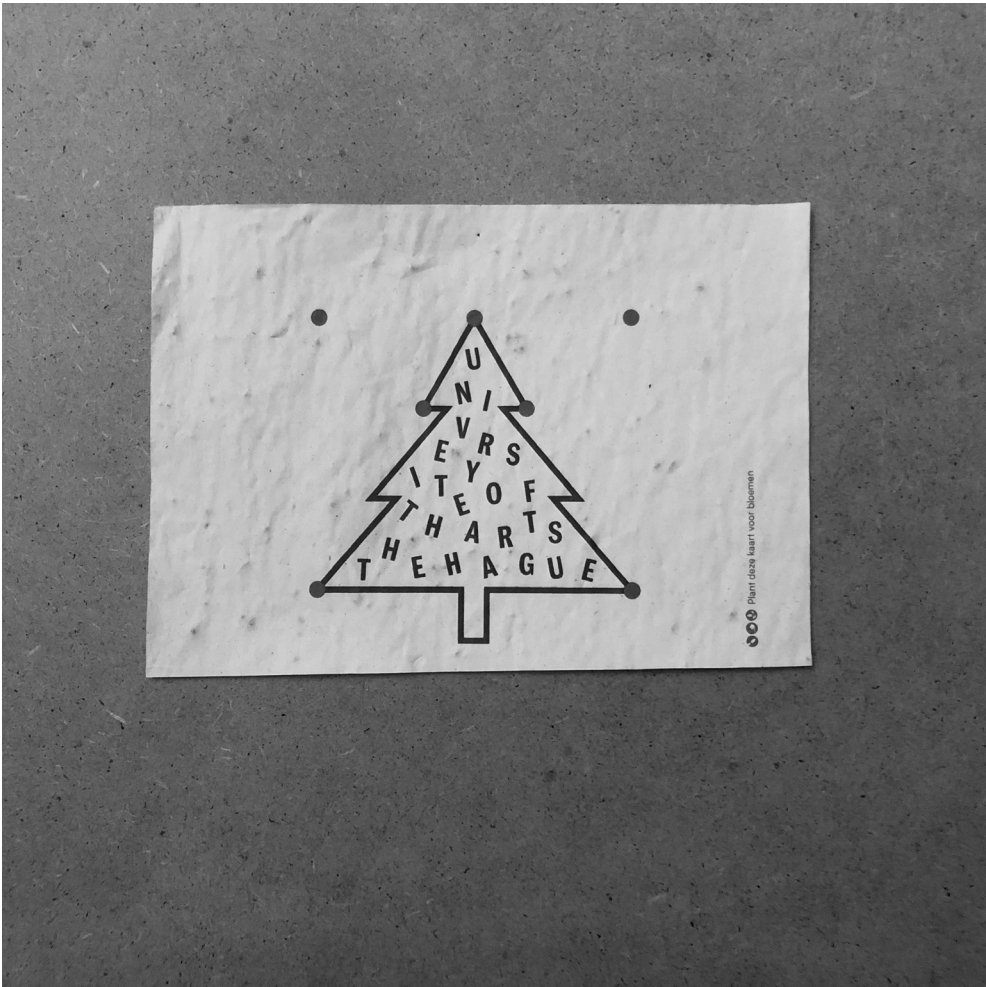

Image #17

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