

# Tracing the Origins, Addressing the Issues, and Exploring the Solutions of the Accommodation System for College Students in China

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## Abstract

Chinese higher education institutions have implemented a centralized accommodation arrangement system for students since ancient times. The emergence and continuation of this system have their corresponding economic, ideological, and functional value bases. However, in the contemporary higher education environment, the foundation upon which this dormitory management system relies has undergone significant changes, resulting in practical issues such as numerous dormitory conflicts, high fire safety risks, low educational effectiveness, and poor social benefits. The reform of the accommodation system in Chinese universities can draw on the “residential college system” and “accommodation application system” models of foreign universities, while combining China’s national conditions and traditional culture to create a university accommodation system with Chinese characteristics.

## Keywords

Higher Education Institutions, Centralized Accommodation Arrangement System, Residential College System, Accommodation Application System

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## 1. Introduction

Currently, student accommodation in Chinese universities predominantly adopts a centralized and unified arrangement model. This model is characterized by the school’s unified arrangement of accommodation for all students (including undergraduates and postgraduates) upon enrollment. Students are not required to choose whether to live on campus or not, nor can they select their accommodation conditions, thus exhibiting a certain degree of “compulsiveness”. For the convenience of discussion, this accommodation system is referred to as the “centralized

accommodation arrangement system” in this paper. This accommodation system has a long history in China, spanning from ancient Chinese higher education, modern higher education, and continuing into contemporary Chinese higher education. The emergence and continuation of the “centralized accommodation arrangement” model have certain ideological and material foundations, as well as certain institutional values. However, with the progress and development of society, this system will inevitably exhibit some limitations of the times and gradually become a shackle that hinders the further development of Chinese higher education. Therefore, tracing the history of the student accommodation system in Chinese universities, analyzing its current situation and problems, and exploring its future development direction have important practical significance.

## 2. Research Framework

This paper is divided into three parts. The first part traces the origin and development process of the “centralized accommodation system” in Chinese higher education. The article first divides this process into three different historical stages: ancient Chinese higher education, modern higher education, and contemporary higher education. Then, it analyzes the implementation of this system from three aspects: ideological foundation, material foundation, and institutional function. The second part explores the problems that have emerged in the implementation of the “centralized accommodation system” in modern Chinese higher education, mainly including five aspects: dormitory conflicts, significant safety hazards, inadequate privacy protection, poor educational outcomes, and low social evaluation. The third part studies the development trend of the student accommodation system in Chinese higher education and solutions to the problems related to the “centralized accommodation system”. It adopts a comparative research approach to compare the accommodation models of Chinese and Western universities. Finally, it draws a conclusion that Chinese higher education should be based on China’s national conditions, learn from the residential college system and accommodation application system of Western universities, and create a new model of student accommodation in Chinese higher education.

## 3. Literature Review

The accommodation system for college students in China goes far beyond merely providing a place to stay. As an important spatial carrier for “holistic education”, it deeply reflects the evolution of higher education concepts. Existing research mainly revolves around three dimensions: historical evolution, localization practices, and international comparisons. However, the quantity of such research is limited, and there is still room for further exploration.

1) Historical context: The functional evolution from “dormitory” to “dormitory”

An examination of the origins of China’s accommodation system serves as the foundation for understanding its contemporary form. Qu (1993) outlined the

macro background of the development of education from ancient academies to modern universities in his comprehensive historical work, providing a historical coordinate system for the study of the accommodation system. Zhang & Liu's (2007) investigation was more focused, clearly revealing the profound transformation of student accommodation patterns from traditional academy "dormitories" to modern university "dormitories". Their research pointed out that "dormitories" were academic community spaces that integrated learning, living, and self-cultivation, while "dormitories" in modern times are more regarded as living management units in the context of large-scale education, with their educational function significantly weakened in this process. Li & Jin (2020) further echoed this viewpoint in "Reform of the College System in Chinese Universities: Origin, Characteristics, and Paths", pointing out that the current reform of the college system is, in a sense, a modern return and call to the spirit of "life education" and "holistic education" of traditional academies.

### 2) Localization Practice: Exploration and Dilemmas of the "Academy System" Reform

To compensate for the deficiencies of traditional dormitory management models, since the beginning of the 21st century, numerous universities in China have actively explored innovations in accommodation systems represented by the "college system". Liu & Yan (2021) systematically analyzed the "local construction" of the American residential college model in Chinese universities, pointing out its preliminary practices in physical space, organizational structure, and student activities. However, it also faces structural challenges such as unclear responsibilities between professional colleges and superficial mentorship systems. In response to these practices, Yu (2017) conducted an in-depth analysis of the "college system" as a talent cultivation model in her doctoral dissertation, elucidating its core concepts of general education, mentor guidance, and community education. Nevertheless, the path of reform is not smooth sailing. Liu (2020), based on multiple case studies in "The Realistic Dilemmas and Solutions to the Reform of the College System in Universities", pointed out that the current reform generally faces the bottleneck of "resembling in appearance but not in essence". Specifically, it manifests as high management costs and frictions in responsibilities and rights due to the collaboration between dual colleges, the failure of multiple teams such as mentors, head teachers, and counselors to form a joint force in educating students, and the lack of cultivation of student community culture. These studies collectively indicate that successful localization is by no means a simple institutional transplantation. Liu (2014), in "College System Reform: Issues and Countermeasures", emphasized that the core of college construction lies in cultural construction, and it is necessary to cultivate a shared set of values and life attitudes; otherwise, hardware construction will ultimately become an "empty shell".

### 3) International Comparison: Conceptual Differences and Model Reference

In-depth comparative studies have provided valuable theoretical insights and reflections for China's local practices. The residential college system of world-class

universities such as Yale University has become the main frame of reference. Liu (2007) and Xu (2015) conducted research from the perspectives of practice and ideological origins, respectively, pointing out that the core of the Yale model lies in its role as a spiritual and practical carrier of general education, which is in line with the concept of liberal education advocated by the Yale Report, aiming to create a “spiritual home” for teachers and students. Comparative studies based on this foundation are more profound. Liu & Zhang (2015) as well as Wang (2024) found through a case comparison between Yale University and Fudan University that the fundamental difference between the two lies in their ideological positioning: Yale’s residential colleges are the center of undergraduate education, deeply integrated into teaching and academic guidance; while Chinese academies still serve as supplements and expansions to professional education in most cases, with an essential distinction between “center” and “periphery”. Zhang & Fan (2019) further confirmed in “Residential Colleges and General Education: Cases from Harvard, Yale, and Fudan” that the vitality of residential colleges lies in their substantive integration with the general education curriculum system, rather than simply being adjacent in physical space. These comparative studies clearly reveal that when Chinese universities introduce Western models, if they only learn from the “form” and ignore the “spirit”, that is, the spiritual essence as the core field of liberal education—the reform is easily reduced to a mere formality.

In summary, existing research has clearly outlined the evolutionary path of China’s university accommodation system, from traditional dormitories to modern dormitories, and further to the exploration of academy system reforms. Significant progress has been made in local practical reflection and international comparison. The main shortcomings are as follows: Firstly, there is currently no research that examines the “centralized accommodation system” as a common model across various stages of higher education in China. Secondly, there are few studies that categorize and analyze the various issues arising from the centralized accommodation model of Chinese university students in the 21st century, and elaborate on the motivations for reforming the university student accommodation system based on this. Thirdly, there is a lack of aggregation of management concepts for university student accommodation, such as market-oriented management concepts, contract-based management concepts, etc.

## 4. Origin Tracing

### 4.1. Ancient Higher Education

Ancient Chinese higher education encompassed both government-run institutions, represented by the “Tai Xue” (Imperial College) and academies such as “Songyang Academy” and “Yuelu Academy”, as well as private institutions, exemplified by the “Jixia Academy” in the State of Qi (A major feudal state in ancient China). These higher education institutions all required students to reside on campus. The Tai Xue had dedicated “dormitories” where sleeping, eating, and attending classes were all centralized, with drumming serving as a signal. In acade-

mies and colleges, different functional areas were designated, including areas for students to reside, dine, attend classes, store books, and perform rituals.

This article posits that the centralized accommodation system adopted in ancient higher education was primarily due to the following reasons:

1) In terms of external material basis: In ancient times, transportation was inconvenient, and students could only ensure a unified teaching order by residing on campus. From the perspective of students, living on campus was their best and only choice. From the perspective of educational institutions, arranging students to reside on campus in a centralized manner was a necessary condition for achieving a unified teaching management order. Therefore, students' desire to live on campus and educational institutions' need for students to live on campus are completely aligned in terms of interest demands, which can be described as a "mutual pursuit". Using Marxist theory of "economic base and superstructure" to explain, the accommodation system of ancient Chinese higher education institutions was highly compatible with the socio-economic foundation of that time.

2) In terms of the underlying ideological foundation: Since the Qin Dynasty, China has established a centralized governance model, laying the ideological foundation for "all affairs in the world, big or small, are decided by the higher authorities". Coupled with Confucian concepts of "the divine right of kings" and "the three cardinal guides and five constant virtues" that legitimize and ethicize this order, despite dynastic changes over thousands of years, this "collectivist" or "holistic" mindset of obeying unified management has become deeply ingrained in the hearts of the people (China's planned economy in the 20th century was essentially an embodiment of collectivist thinking). Based on this ideological and cultural soil, higher education institutions and their students feel relatively comfortable with the uniformly arranged and centrally managed accommodation system.

Here, a comparison with ancient Western cultural thought is warranted. Individualism and liberalism emerged in the West from the ancient Greek period (roughly corresponding to the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods in China's 5th century BC). For instance, in ancient Greek philosophy, Protagoras, a representative of the Sophists, put forward the proposition that "Man is the measure of all things", emphasizing the value of individual experience and challenging traditional theocracy and collective norms. Roman law further established "individual rights" as the core cornerstone of the contemporary civil law system. Additionally, later Christian ethics emphasized that individuals could dialogue with God through the Bible (negating the intermediary role of the church). Especially since the Renaissance and the Enlightenment in the 14th century, there has been an emphasis on human value and the liberation of individuality. Even in terms of current constitutions in the East and West, the General Principles of the Chinese Constitution place more emphasis on collective values (such as socialism and common prosperity), while Western constitutions generally take individual rights as their logical starting point (for example, the preamble of the United States Constitution focuses on "liberty"). In summary, ancient Western ideological and cul-

tural soil contains a strong element of “individualism”. In contrast, China has exhibited distinct “collectivist” thinking characteristics since ancient times. This thinking soil is highly suitable for the “centralized accommodation system” to take root and flourish.

3) In ancient times, higher education institutions often regarded student dormitories as a secondary classroom for educating students. Students’ performance in the dormitory was incorporated into the assessment scope of their cultivation and education. Among them, Tai Xue (the Imperial University of ancient China) often punished students who had bad behavior in the dormitory by relocating their dormitories or other means, while the Academy or the College often guided students with moral norms such as “benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness” from Confucianism. Specifically, the Imperial College established the position of “dormitory head”, and also arranged special personnel to supervise students’ behavior and manners, as well as personnel to manage students’ entry and exit. In the management system of the College, the position of “dormitory head” also plays an important role. The dormitory head is not only responsible for supervising students’ attendance, encouraging virtue, and correcting mistakes, but also assists in managing the College’s property, books and materials, and the distribution of scholarships and grants.

Meanwhile, the idea of student self-governance began to sprout. Taking Tai Xue of the Northern Song Dynasty as an example, senior students were entrusted with management responsibilities. When selecting dormitory heads, colleges generally favored students who were both academically excellent and stable in handling affairs. It is noteworthy that a complete system of autonomous positions had already been established at that time, including more than ten functional roles such as general affairs management, financial supervision, etiquette hosting, reception guidance, etc. These positions were not only selected through rigorous assessments but also offered salaries as incentives.

Of particular note is the wisdom in allocating housing in ancient academies. Tai Xue allocated accommodation based on students’ specializations in different categories of classics, grouping students with similar learning and research interests together. This practice of allocating housing based on academic expertise resonates with the contemporary practice of assigning students to dormitories based on their majors, spanning time and space. This arrangement effectively promotes academic discussion and intellectual exchange among peers, fostering a positive and interactive learning atmosphere.

From an institutional causation analysis, the material and ideological foundations jointly constitute the prerequisites for implementing the collective dormitory system. The scale of school construction and educational management philosophy, as fundamental elements, directly determine the feasibility of implementing this system in ancient Chinese higher education. The functional value of dormitories as a carrier for educating students is an additional benefit that gradually emerges in the practical process. This late-mover advantage has had a posi-

tive impact on the sustainable development of the system. Among the three major elements mentioned above, the former two serve as the foundation of the entire system, while the latter is like decorative art inside the building, which, although not essential to the structure, endows the space with more possibilities. The ingenious design of this system lies in its ability to fulfill both the management demands of the school (“want me to live”) and the actual needs of students (“I want to live”). The two achieve a high degree of balance and unity in the historical context.

## **4.2. Modern Higher Education**

After the Opium War, China gradually became a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society, and the higher education system also began its transformation towards modern higher education. In 1862, the “Imperial Translators’ College” founded by the Qing government became the starting point of modern higher education in China. Subsequently, the “Westernization Movement” and the “Reform Movement” emerged in succession, and a number of public schools drawing on Western educational models were established, such as the Beiyang University established in 1895 and the Imperial University of Peking established in 1898 (renamed Peking University in 1912). At the same time, foreign churches also began to establish missionary universities in China, such as St. John’s University, University of Nanking, and Yenching University etc. After the establishment of the Republic of China in 1911, well-known institutions such as National Wuhan University, Zhejiang University, Tsinghua University, Private Nankai University, and Fudan University emerged one after another. These modern higher education institutions were greatly influenced by the West in terms of teaching content and form, but in terms of student accommodation system, they still continued the traditional model of ancient Chinese higher education management. Early new-style schools followed the management model of traditional “academies”, adopting a centralized accommodation system for all students. Although universities in the Red Revolutionary Base Areas also required all students to live on campus, the accommodation conditions were extremely harsh, and even required teachers and students to personally renovate school buildings and dormitories. With the “spread of Western learning to the East” and the rise of missionary universities, the accommodation system of higher education in the middle and late stages of modern China gradually became professionalized. While retaining the unified centralized accommodation system, the dormitory areas were gradually separated, and the dormitory management system was also increasingly improved. For example, in the 1930s, Tsinghua University built a dedicated student dormitory area in the northern part of the campus, with dining halls, gymnasiums, and other living facilities adjacent to it, forming a clear separation from the teaching and office areas. As a missionary university, Yenching University’s student dormitory area centered around Weiming Lake, with male and female dormitories separated north and south, and each dormitory compound was equipped with dining halls, gym-

nasiums, and other facilities.

The reasons for modern Chinese higher education institutions choosing the “centralized accommodation system” are similar to those in ancient times, and can be summarized into the following aspects.

1) From the perspective of economic foundation, the level of socio-economic development in modern China was still relatively low. In the late Qing Dynasty, the capital export and military aggression of the great powers continued to weaken the sovereign economy, with agricultural economy dominating and natural economy almost disintegrating. During the Republic of China period, the warlord separatism, as well as the subsequent Anti-Japanese War and Liberation War, also severely hindered socio-economic development. In this economic environment, students’ desire for more comfortable accommodation was still limited by their limited economic conditions.

2) From an ideological perspective, although the “liberalism” ideology has sprouted among higher education students with the influx of Western culture, it has not grown to the extent of strongly rejecting the existing system in the economic and cultural soil of modern China. Even if college students feel slightly uncomfortable with the “centralized accommodation system” at a spiritual level (for example, feeling that collective accommodation seems to affect personal life and freedom), they lack the ability and willingness to change it. Therefore, modern higher education institutions have chosen to inherit this accommodation system.

3) The educational function of dormitories has been verified and recognized. The modern higher education system has always emphasized the concept of holistic education, incorporating students’ living spaces into the scope of education, and expanding the educational functions of dormitories through diversified practical methods. Taking Yenching University as an example, its dormitory area was not only equipped with cultural and sports facilities such as table tennis rooms and reading rooms, but also organized self-management activities for meals to cultivate female students’ practical abilities in household management. Under the special wartime environment, the Anti-Japanese Military and Political University creatively carried out activities such as revolutionary wall newspaper creation, red song teaching, and military sports competitions, which not only enriched the extracurricular lives of students but also honed their revolutionary will and organizational skills. To build a safe educational environment, universities generally establish a systematic living management system. Yenching University implemented gender-specific time management, strictly restricting access to female dormitories by the opposite sex except on specific reception days, and established a nighttime dormitory check-in system; Tsinghua University, on the other hand, combined electronic access control systems with routine assessment to quantitatively manage daily behaviors such as bathing frequency and bedtime. These systems not only reflect the characteristics of the times but also demonstrate the educational wisdom of educators in integrating living norms with moral shaping. Moreover,

anti-Japanese universities in revolutionary bases also formulated strict school regulations, requiring students to get up on time, participate in drills, have meals, and keep their dormitory clean and orderly, cultivating students' sense of discipline.

### **4.3. Contemporary Higher Education**

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, China has followed a "planned economy" management model in the gradual reconstruction of its higher education system. In the early days, domestic universities uniformly provided free accommodation, but the living conditions for students were relatively basic. After the mid-1950s, the construction of university accommodation environments gradually got back on track, and the architectural style was largely influenced by the former Soviet Union. By the mid-1960s, the living conditions for university students had basically matched the teaching and campus environments. Typically, there were 6 to 12 students per dormitory room. With the resumption of the college entrance examination in 1978, the shortage of university accommodation resources became a common problem in the development of universities. In order to meet the requirement of uniformly arranging accommodation for all undergraduate and graduate students, universities took measures such as renting off-campus housing and increasing dormitory capacity, while also building new apartment-style dormitories and renovating old ones to improve the quality of accommodation. For example, independent bathrooms, communication, and network facilities were added, reducing the number of students per room to 4 to 6, gradually improving dormitory conditions. Since 1997, ordinary universities across the country have implemented "unified enrollment", and although universities still uniformly arrange accommodation for all undergraduate and graduate students, they have shifted from "providing accommodation free of charge" to "appropriately charging students for accommodation". At the same time, the management model of dormitories has shifted from traditional to apartment-style, introducing social resources to form student living communities. Managers continue to leverage the educational function of dormitories through dormitory inspections and critical education.

Overall, the "centralized accommodation" model of Chinese university dormitories has its ideological and material foundations. From the perspective of administrative management in educational institutions, this dormitory management model itself also possesses certain educational functions and values. For example, each student regards the school as their home, which is conducive to enhancing students' sense of belonging to the university; all students live on campus, which is conducive to improving the order and efficiency of campus teaching; the semi-enclosed campus can maximize the personal and property safety of students, thereby contributing to social stability.

## **5. Issues**

With the development of China's economy, the economic conditions of students'

families have generally improved. Coupled with contemporary transportation convenience, students have a better material foundation for pursuing a more comfortable accommodation than that provided by the school by “commuting” or renting a house. In terms of ideological foundation, Western individualism and liberalism have deeply integrated with traditional Chinese culture (for example, China’s Civil Code is based on Roman law, emphasizing the protection of individual rights). Many students have developed a desire to “break free from the constraints of compulsory centralized accommodation” and “pursue a more comfortable and freer living environment” and are attempting to realize it. As a result, the phenomenon of college students “living off-campus” has emerged, and it has shown an increasing trend in recent years. Many universities adopt forms such as requiring parents to sign “informed consent forms” or “off-campus accommodation agreements” to grant permission to students applying for off-campus accommodation, in order to minimize the legal risks arising from students living off-campus. Simply put, the two major cornerstones of the current “centralized accommodation system” in terms of material and ideological aspects have been impacted to some extent. The conflicting interests of “being required to live” and “wanting to live” have emerged among many students, and the defects and problems of the current accommodation system have begun to shift from being implicit to explicit, entering the field of vision of university administrators and the public.

These defects or issues primarily encompass the following aspects.

### **5.1. Dormitory Conflicts Are Common**

Dormitory conflicts are one of the biggest issues with the unified arrangement and centralized accommodation system. Conflicts within university dormitories are both widespread and inevitable. The fundamental reason is that under the unified accommodation system, multiple individuals are forced to live in the same dormitory, where their schedules, hygiene habits, personality traits, values, interpersonal skills, and so on vary. Sometimes, there may even be conflicts of interest. During the process of transitioning from strangers to familiar faces, and from mutual ignorance to mutual understanding, some roommates may develop friendships, while others may harbor resentment towards each other. When negative emotions accumulate to a certain level, conflicts may arise.

From a probabilistic perspective, the probability of significant conflicts arising between two individuals in a dormitory (such as the current two-person dormitories for doctoral students) is 50%. The greater the number of individuals in the dormitory, the higher the probability of conflicts occurring. When some contradictions accumulate to a certain extent, they may turn into intense conflicts. During my over 20 years of working in universities, I have found that applications for dormitory transfers due to conflicts are very common. Almost every counselor encounters several cases of dormitory conflicts every year, and it is not uncommon for these conflicts to escalate to emotional abuse or even physical conflicts.

Extreme cases leading to injuries or even deaths are also occasionally heard of. The well-known “Ma Jiajue case” at Yunnan University, the “thallium poisoning case” at Tsinghua University, and the “dormitory water dispenser poisoning case” at Fudan University are all typical examples of dormitory conflicts. Dormitory conflicts or disputes have nothing to do with the reputation of the university or the academic performance of the students, nor do they have anything to do with the gender of the students. The only common denominator is that conflicts arise between roommates in a multi-person living environment. Moreover, under the current accommodation system, it is not easy for students to resolve these conflicts through methods such as transferring to another dormitory or living off-campus, especially in first-tier cities where land is extremely valuable, and many universities have a shortage of dormitory beds.

To elaborate, potential causes of conflicts arising from differing daily routines among roommates include returning late, staying up late, waking up early, and even snoring, talking in one’s sleep, etc. Potential causes of conflicts stemming from differing hygiene habits include cleanliness obsession, messy items, garbage accumulation, smoking, and dormitory duty rotations, among others. Some prefer a clean and tidy dormitory with neatly arranged items, while others believe that “geniuses” are not concerned with minor details, and the tidiness of the dormitory is not important. Some are neat freaks, cleaning the dormitory every day, while others prioritize convenience and leave clutter wherever they can.

In terms of interpersonal communication, some students in the dormitory environment excessively value comparison and competition, subconsciously viewing their roommates as rivals, and thus exhibiting hostile language and behavior. Dormitory members are mostly students from the same major or class, forming a highly homogenous community. They face direct competitive pressure in areas such as award and merit evaluation, financial aid application, student cadre election, and striving for “graduate school recommendation” opportunities. At the same time, students inevitably develop a competitive mindset in academic achievements such as exam scores and scientific research results.

From the perspective of personality traits, some students grow up in a comfortable environment, accustomed to being pampered and satisfied, and are prone to developing self-centered, opinionated, selfish, and egotistical personalities. They lack teamwork spirit and may become hostile towards their roommates’ words and deeds if they are slightly dissatisfied. On the other hand, some students are introverted and closed, lacking communication skills, giving the impression of being aloof and indifferent, making it difficult for them to establish deep friendships with their roommates. Although virtual online socializing meets the communication needs of some introverted students, it also to some extent reduces the opportunities for face-to-face communication with roommates in real life, leading to a more common phenomenon of being active online and silent offline. Communication barriers among dormitory members are not uncommon.

Currently, students generally lack skills in handling interpersonal relationships,

often escalating minor dormitory conflicts into major disputes. For instance, when disputes arise between roommates, some students do not reflect on their own mistakes but adopt a tough attitude, even roping in other classmates to form opposing camps, engaging in mutual confrontation and intransigence. What's worse, some students vent their negative emotions on social media, or publicly post accusatory remarks on campus social media, attempting to exert influence on the other party through public opinion pressure, thus escalating the conflict to an irreconcilable state, and even escalating it to violent clashes.

Currently, there is no relevant research data on the satisfaction or conflict frequency in Chinese university dormitories. However, the author of this article conducted an incomplete survey and statistics on the group of "undergraduate counselors and graduate counselors" in the university where he/she works, and found that almost 100% of the counselors have dealt with cases where students applied for dormitory adjustments due to dormitory conflicts or dissatisfaction with their dormitories. This proportion is sufficient to indicate that there are certain problems with the "centralized accommodation system" and they are quite common.

## 5.2. Numerous Fire Safety Hazards

The second major issue of multiple people living together in universities is the potential for fire safety accidents. The following historical cases and data provide a vivid illustration of the real-world hazards posed by such risks.

On July 14, 2006, a fire broke out in a female dormitory at the Communication University of China, trapping a female student inside. Later, the trapped student confirmed that the fire originated from a charger on the adjacent bed that caught fire. The charger had been continuously working on the socket for more than three days, eventually causing the circuit to spontaneously ignite.

On October 8, 2006, an electrical fire broke out in a male dormitory on the North Campus of China University of Geosciences (Wuhan), resulting in the complete destruction of two beds inside the room. The accident investigation revealed that the fire was caused by an electric spark generated by an aging electrical circuit due to a table lamp left unswitched on for a long time, which subsequently ignited the paper materials on the bookshelf.

On October 16, 2006, an emergency situation occurred in the female dormitory of the School of Continuing Education at Beijing Normal University. Six students successfully escaped from the third floor using a homemade cloth rope descent device. Upon investigation, it was found that a laptop battery on one of the beds had exploded, igniting the bedding.

On November 14, 2008, a major casualty accident occurred at the Xuhui Campus of Shanghai Business School. Four female students chose to escape by jumping out of the window due to a sudden fire in their dormitory on the sixth floor, and all of them ultimately died. Technical investigation later revealed that a 1500 W electric heating appliance, which had been illegally connected by one of the students, caused the power distribution system to collapse, subsequently triggering

an open flame and resulting in a fire.

On August 17, 2016, a dormitory at Yantai University suffered a complete destruction of indoor items due to improper management of mosquito repellent incense. Students left their dormitory after igniting mosquito repellent devices without clearing the messy clothes around them, and all indoor items turned into ashes after the fire.

The triggering factors of the above cases are ostensibly related to “leaving the charger plugged in for a long time”, “leaving the desk lamp on for a long time”, “using a computer on the bed without turning it off for a long time”, “using high-power electrical appliances”, and “using mosquito coil incense”. However, the deeper reason lies in the overcrowding of dormitory personnel under the unified accommodation arrangement, which leads to ideological paralysis. Specifically:

1) The more people there are in a single dormitory room, the weaker the fire safety awareness of the dormitory members tends to be. As the saying goes, “Three monks have no water to drink.” From a psychological perspective, the more dormitory members there are, the less influence each individual feels their personal behavior has on the overall dormitory. In terms of fire safety responsibility, even a student with good electricity usage habits may feel that their persistence is meaningless when they see others with poor electricity usage habits, and gradually become assimilated.

2) The more people there are in a single dormitory room, the more risk points there are for ignition sources. Leaving the desk lamp on, not unplugging the charger, not turning off the computer, using high-power electrical appliances, connecting power strips in series, smoking, lighting mosquito repellent incense, using electric blankets, etc., are all causes of ignition sources in student dormitories. For cases caused by electricity, a larger number of people means a higher electricity consumption, further increasing the probability of electrical appliance malfunction. Assuming that the number of risk points that each person in the dormitory may cause is  $N$ , four people may have  $4N$  risk points. Theoretically speaking, the risk of fire in dormitory doubles with each additional person.

3) The more people there are in a single dormitory room, the greater the probability of a fire source igniting something. The amount and clutter of items in a student dormitory are also directly related to the number of dormitory residents. The more people there are, the more items (and combustible materials) there are, and the more cluttered it becomes. Once there is a fire source, the possibility of igniting combustible materials is also greater.

4) The more people there are in a single dormitory room, the greater the possibility of “one person causing a fire, affecting their roommates”. From the above cases, it can be seen that dormitory fires are mostly caused by the negligence of one person. At the least, they can burn down all the items in the dormitory; at worst, they can endanger the lives or health of everyone in the dormitory. Theoretically, the more people there are in a single dormitory room, the greater the loss caused to the dormitory in case of a fire. The reason why the loss is limited to “the

dormitory” is that the brick and concrete walls between dormitories have a good effect in hindering the spread of fire and the toxicity of smoke. According to the cases reported over the years, fires in single dormitory rooms have a small impact on other dormitories.

### 5.3. No Privacy

The Civil Code of the People’s Republic of China stipulates that personal privacy is protected by law. “Privacy” refers to information that the individual does not want to disclose or make known to others. From a legal perspective, the right to privacy is a basic human right. However, under the centralized accommodation system, there is almost no privacy to speak of among roommates. For example, roommates are well aware of each other’s physical defects, bad personal habits, family financial difficulties, breakups with girlfriends, strained family relationships with parents who often quarrel, being from a single-parent family, and so on. Although the information is not intended to be disclosed by the individuals, it may be inadvertently revealed through phone calls between roommates and their family members or changes in roommates’ moods. This is also the reason why some international students in Chinese universities refuse to be arranged to live in multi-person dormitories. There have even been complaints from international students to the Ministry of Education of China about a certain university in Beijing arranging multi-person dormitories, and many universities had to make concessions to allow international students to enjoy better accommodation conditions in universities than domestic students. Overall, the current “centralized accommodation system” in universities is not conducive to protecting students’ privacy rights.

## 6. The Educational Function of Dormitories Is Insufficient

As mentioned earlier, Chinese higher education has always attached great importance to the educational function of dormitories. In ancient times, higher education institutions incorporated students’ misbehavior in dormitories into their moral assessment for punishment, and selected outstanding students to participate in dormitory management. In modern times, higher education has expanded extracurricular activities such as reading and self-study in dormitories, and implemented strict dormitory management systems to provide safety and discipline education to students. Generally, contemporary Chinese higher education also incorporates certain serious negative behaviors of students in dormitories into the evaluation and selection of awards and honors.

However, it is not difficult to observe from the above analysis that the “educational function” of contemporary higher education dormitories in China is primarily positioned on traditional educational goals, namely cultivating students’ good behavioral habits and self-discipline abilities. In fact, the actual effectiveness of this function is not evident in contemporary times. Contemporary network information technology has even taken the “educational function” of dormitories to

another extreme: for many contemporary college students, the dormitory has become a black hole that consumes time and a breeding ground for eroding will-power. Many students choose to spend their extracurricular time in the dormitory, even relying on “takeout” for meals and being too lazy to go to the cafeteria. The learning atmosphere in most dormitories is not strong, and students often unconsciously become addicted to entertainment devices and online information in the dormitory. Chatting with netizens, playing games, watching movies and TV shows, and other activities through mobile phones or computers occupy a lot of time. Students unknowingly waste their time, and their original ambition may also be eroded. Due to the gradual negative consequences brought by students’ habit of “staying indoors” in the dormitory, universities are unable to evaluate and regulate adjustments. Overall, the function of contemporary university dormitories in cultivating students’ good behavioral habits and self-discipline abilities has seriously deteriorated.

More importantly, even though the “centralized accommodation system” can effectively cultivate students’ behavioral habits and self-discipline, and produce students who conform to traditional concepts and even possess a uniform personality and ability model, it is far from sufficient for contemporary university talent cultivation and societal demand for talent. In other words, the original training objectives have been unable to adapt to the new requirements of the times. In today’s rapidly developing society and technology, the core of university talent cultivation objectives has shifted to the cultivation of “innovative ability”. Referring to the practices of world-class universities such as Yale University, Oxford University, and Cambridge University, universities should not only closely focus on the cultivation goal of “innovative ability” in teaching and scientific research, but also fully utilize the “educational” function of student dormitory management models to assist in cultivating students’ innovative abilities. However, China’s current centralized accommodation system is far from this cultivation goal and is not conducive to fully utilizing the educational function of dormitories.

## **7. High Construction Costs and Low Social Benefits**

1) High construction costs. In most universities in China, student dormitory buildings are generally the most numerous and occupy the largest area. Assuming an average of 4 students per dormitory and an average of 1,000 people (250 rooms) per dormitory building, if a school has 20,000 students, and all students are arranged to live on campus, at least 20 dormitory buildings are needed. The cost of building, maintenance, and management is a very heavy economic burden for universities. In recent years, universities have expanded enrollment significantly, and many have increased the construction of dormitory buildings by borrowing from the state to meet the requirements of student accommodation arrangements. The excessive burden on universities in the construction of student dormitories will, to some extent, affect their ability to invest in teaching and research.

2) Low social benefits. Currently, the standard accommodation fee for most

universities is 800-1000 yuan per academic year. In most cities where universities are located, this fee standard may be less than 1/10 of the market price. Therefore, theoretically, students and parents should be grateful for the cheap dormitories provided by universities. However, according to the author's visits to each new generation of university students and their parents over the past three years, most interviewees share a similar basic viewpoint, that is, they believe it is natural for universities to provide cheap accommodation, and they generally respond with the question "otherwise where would students live". Some parents even believe that public schools are "public welfare", so "no charge" is more reasonable. In terms of accommodation conditions, some parents of students believe that since universities charge fees, they should provide accommodation conditions that meet the students' requirements, including air conditioning, private bathrooms, etc.; some parents of students found the school dormitory conditions to be poor when they sent their children to school and directly complained to the school leaders; some parents of students directly contacted the school dormitory management department and insulted the staff; some students or parents requested the school to provide different types of dormitories for students to choose from. Overall, students or parents generally believe that providing accommodation for all students is the basic obligation of the school, and there are many complaints about poor accommodation conditions, but few people positively evaluate the "low accommodation fees". It seems that the "public welfare" of educational institutions should be equated with cheap or even free, but no one would apply this logic to medical institutions that also have public welfare characteristics (i.e., no one would think that hospitals are public welfare and therefore should be free). In a word, the "centralized arrangement of accommodation system" has not achieved the social benefits it deserves.

## 8. Way Out

### 8.1. Comparison between Domestic and Foreign Situations

Based on the above analysis, it can be seen that the "centralized accommodation system" in Chinese universities has a long history. However, the foundation upon which this system relies has changed in contemporary times, making it unable to fully adapt to the requirements of the evolving era. Therefore, exploring new accommodation models for university students in the new era holds significant practical importance. Comparing and drawing lessons from models such as the "residential college system" and "accommodation application system" employed by universities both domestically and internationally is an important approach.

#### 8.1.1. Residential College System

The residential college system originated in 1180 at the University of Paris, with the establishment of a college aimed at providing boarding for impoverished students. Later, it transcended its simple residential function and incorporated teaching activities, forming the rudiments of a residential college. This model was later

adopted and refined by universities such as Cambridge and Oxford, ultimately evolving into a mature residential college system. In 1925, Yale University began to draw inspiration from the residential college system of Cambridge and Oxford. After further refinement, it gradually became a typical representative of the residential college system in Western universities. Currently, Yale University boasts 14 independent residential colleges, each resembling a self-contained quadrangle complex. These colleges are equipped with student dormitories, dean residences, faculty apartments, and various functional buildings, offering comprehensive living facilities. These amenities encompass dining halls, libraries, gyms, art studios, music practice rooms, photography darkrooms, computer labs, laundries, billiard rooms, student kitchens, theaters, climbing walls, squash courts, and saunas, all of which are open to students around the clock. Furthermore, each college possesses its own publications, sports teams, interest groups, drama groups, and choirs, comprehensively catering to students' needs in terms of accommodation, dining, socializing, and participation in diverse academic and extracurricular activities. Through the residential college system, Yale empowers students with complete autonomy in course selection, interdisciplinary and cross-major academic research, and decentralized management of residential colleges, thereby fostering liberal education.

Under the "residential college system", universities are divided into graduate schools, several academic departments, and several residential colleges, in addition to administrative institutions. Academic departments are responsible for teaching, research, and professional education, while residential colleges are responsible for comprehensive training beyond undergraduate courses. The functions of residential colleges and academic departments are intertwined and complementary, jointly promoting the comprehensive and free development of undergraduates. Each residential college accommodates several hundred undergraduate students from different grades and majors. Freshmen are usually arranged in a large suite of 4 to 6 people, with several independent bedrooms (single and double rooms) in each suite, sharing a common hall. In terms of management, residential colleges have relatively independent authority, and students fully participate in autonomous management. Students' identity is more as students of a certain residential college rather than a certain professional college. In addition, teachers also reside in residential colleges. Therefore, it is easier to achieve convenient communication between undergraduate students of different grades and majors, as well as between teachers and students.

In general, the characteristics of residential colleges are: coverage only for undergraduates; professional diversity of student groups; teachers and students living and participating in activities together; student participation in autonomous management (working equally with teachers and college leaders); and comprehensive hardware facilities. The core function of residential colleges is to enable close communication between teachers and students, and between students, allowing teachers and student groups to establish convenient and close connections.

It can be said that residential colleges create a more intimate interpersonal, cross-disciplinary, and cross-teacher-student academic exchange community, thereby promoting students to participate more deeply in academic activities and achieve comprehensive development, maximizing the educational function of dormitories.

### **8.1.2. Accommodation Application System**

Since the “residential college system” is generally only for undergraduates, graduate education in Western universities generally adopts the “residential application system”. In addition, in other Western universities that do not implement the “residential college system”, both undergraduates and graduate students generally adopt this “residential application system” model. This model is reflected in many American universities as “themed housing and living learning communities” (students can choose to live with classmates who share the same interests or academic pursuits). Some universities also reflect it in the form of ordinary student apartments, but with a wider range of housing options. These include single rooms, double rooms, or family rooms (apartments with partners or children), as well as two-bedroom, one-living room, one-bathroom or larger apartment-style suites (including multiple rooms and a shared hall). Overall, under the residential application system, the school provides a portion of dormitory rooms, and students can choose to apply for different conditions of dormitory rooms. Students who do not apply or fail to apply successfully can rent a house outside the school on their own. In addition, the relationship between successful applicants and the dormitory management is an equal “contractual relationship”. In fact, many students choose to rent a house outside the school because the school’s dormitory rooms do not allow pets. Overall, the characteristic of the “residential application system” lies in students’ right to choose. Students can choose to live on or off campus, and they can also choose their accommodation conditions.

### **8.1.3. Attempts of “Residential Colleges” in China**

Due to the prominent educational function of the “residential college system”, since the 21st century, some higher education institutions in China have considered reviving the ancient Chinese “academy system” based on its advantages, and are committed to exploring and innovating in enhancing students’ comprehensive qualities. Taking the four major academies (Zhide, Tengfei, Keqing, Renzhong) established by Fudan College in 2005 as an example, these academies adhere to the “student-centered” educational philosophy and have established a three-dimensional educational system that includes a student work office, a college affairs committee, a coordination work committee, a mentor committee, and student self-governing organizations. Similarly, the “Wenzhi Yuan” academy group created by Xi’an Jiaotong University has eight affiliated academies, each of which not only has an independent cultural identity system, leadership team, and service team but also forms a parallel management structure with complementary professional colleges. In comparison, there are significant differences in institutional

layout and organizational structure between Yale residential colleges and Chinese-style academies.

Yale adopts a “matrix-style” management structure, and its residential education system employs a unique dual-track operational mechanism: academic departments and residential colleges form a networked intersection, enabling residential colleges to not only shoulder the responsibility of student life management but also extensively engage in educational and teaching activities, with relatively independent and autonomous management authority. The mentor team of residential colleges is composed of professors from different academic departments in the College of Arts and Sciences. They not only undertake professional teaching tasks but also regularly conduct academic salons and life guidance in residential colleges, providing comprehensive care for student growth. This “dual appointment” role positioning is not only reflected in job responsibilities but also in the design of the salary system, the salary structure of professors in residential colleges comes from both academic departments and residential college guidance, thus ensuring the effective integration of educational resources.

Chinese universities prefer the “dual-track management” model, which combines residential colleges with professional departments, but this model faces certain frictions in the cooperation mechanism. Taking the early reform of Fudan University as an example, there was a period of disharmony between the residential college (Fudan College) and the professional departments. Fudan College took full control of students’ daily affairs management, which to some extent weakened the direct jurisdiction and educational influence of the professional departments on students. As a result, the professional departments felt that students were being “stolen away”, leading to a certain degree of opposition. To reconcile this contradiction, Fudan University attempted in the 2012 reform to encourage the professional departments to actively participate in the construction of the college. However, due to various factors such as architectural functional layout, teacher management, and evaluation systems, the cooperation between the professional departments and the residential college still appears loose, lacking effective institutional guarantees. Furthermore, under the “residential college” model represented by Fudan University, teachers do not live in the college with students, and the administrative management relationship between the college and the professional departments has not been straightened out. Students are also unable to truly participate in the flat-style college autonomy, and the comprehensive educational function is not fully utilized.

Overall, both the “residential college system” and the “residential application system” have their respective advantages: the former can fully leverage the educational function of dormitories, while the latter gives students the right to choose their accommodation. Now, let’s examine the main issues under China’s current accommodation system from the perspective of these two models: 1) Under the “residential college system”, dormitories generally only have single and double rooms. Due to the small number of people in each dormitory, dormitory conflicts

caused by differences in living habits or hygiene habits between roommates will be greatly reduced. Moreover, due to the small number of people in the dormitory, factors affecting fire safety will also be significantly reduced. At the same time, personal privacy can be better protected. Of course, under the single “residential college system” model, as each residential college needs to be equipped with comprehensive hardware facilities, this may pose new financial challenges and logistical management difficulties for most universities in China; 2) Under the “residential application system”, whether students apply for on-campus accommodation or off-campus rental housing, since both are contractual in nature, students have relatively sufficient choice. If there are dormitory conflicts or dissatisfaction with dormitory living, students can choose to apply for another dormitory or rent off-campus housing to resolve the issue, which can also address the negative social benefits of dormitories. Moreover, under the application system, universities only provide a portion of dormitories, thus to a certain extent, it can avoid the problem of high construction costs for dormitory buildings.

## 8.2. Conclusion

This article argues that combining the residential college system with the accommodation application system can better address the numerous issues under the accommodation arrangement system in Chinese universities, and more effectively fulfill the “educational” function of university dormitories, promoting the comprehensive development of students. China should draw on the strengths of relevant systems in Western universities, find common ground between Eastern and Western educational philosophies, such as emphasizing students’ comprehensive development and cultivating innovative and critical thinking, while integrating China’s national conditions and cultural traditions. Additionally, it should draw on the experience of universities such as Fudan University in attempting to establish a residential college system, and on this basis, construct a contemporary university accommodation system with Chinese characteristics.

Specifically, two options can be considered. One is to refer to the model of universities such as Yale University, fully incorporating undergraduates into the “residential college system” and generally implementing the “residential application system” for master’s and doctoral students. The other is to implement both the “residential college system” and the “residential application system” for all undergraduates and graduate students, allowing all undergraduates and graduate students to apply for on-campus housing. Students who successfully apply will be uniformly subject to the residential college system. This will facilitate communication among students of different majors and levels to a greater extent. Comparatively speaking, the advantage of the first option is to distinguish undergraduates and graduate students as two different educational stages, adopt different educational management methods, and save universities’ investment in dormitory construction. The advantage of the second option is to give all students the right to choose. However, from an expectation perspective, if the school’s accommodation

conditions are good, facilities are complete, and accommodation prices are cheaper than the market, most students may choose to apply for residential college housing. In this case, it may be possible to achieve the unity of “wanting me to live” and “wanting to live” without compulsion.

Of course, constructing a contemporary university accommodation system with Chinese characteristics is a complex systematic project. The specific implementation plan and path require thorough theoretical research by the national education administrative department. If necessary, reform pilot projects may be adopted to steadily advance the process.

Regardless of the dormitory management model chosen by Chinese universities in the future, this article suggests that the higher education management department should adjust its relevant management philosophy:

1) It is necessary to further incorporate “market-oriented” management factors. In 2008, the General Office of the Ministry of Education issued a notice requiring domestic universities to “strictly prohibit arranging housing based on students’ economic status” and to conduct self-inspections across the country. The self-inspection contents include: implementing the situation of students “accommodating by class” and strictly prohibiting the arrangement of housing based on students’ economic status. This article believes that the management philosophy contained in this notice was very suitable for the national conditions and students’ wishes during China’s planned economy era, and it had contributed to the development of higher education in China. However, with the development of China’s market economy today, this philosophy may no longer be applicable and may even hinder the development of higher education. On the other hand, allowing university students to choose dormitories with different conditions based on their family’s economic ability will not have a negative impact on ideological and political education in universities, nor will it impact the self-esteem of students from economically disadvantaged families. In contemporary universities, among the four aspects of students’ daily life, “clothing, food, shelter, and transportation”, except for the condition of “shelter” which is basically the same, other aspects have already shown significant differentiation: students with different economic conditions have different habits in eating, dressing, and transportation, as well as different leisure and entertainment methods, which reflects the vigorous development of China’s economy and social progress.

2) It is necessary to further shift from a “paternalistic” management philosophy to a “contract-based” and “legalized” management approach among equal parties. In terms of management philosophy, most higher education institutions in China still regard themselves as “parents” and treat adult college students as children in primary and secondary schools for education and management, resulting in the cultivation of numerous “giant babies”. For example, many student dormitories do not pay attention to public health, piling up garbage at the dormitory entrance, unwilling to go downstairs and dispose of it in the trash can, or violating fire safety regulations by connecting power supplies or using electricity illegally. Schools

have no effective management methods for this, and often the prohibitions are not enforced. If “contract-based” management is adopted, it can be stipulated in the contract that students must comply with the school’s management regulations regarding dormitory fire safety, garbage disposal, and other aspects. If any student violates these regulations, the school can unilaterally terminate the accommodation contract.

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This may be more effective in cultivating students’ safety awareness and good living habits.

This article argues that, apart from the conferral of academic degrees and educational management activities, universities and students are equal civil subjects in terms of accommodation management. The legal relationship between them is more of a “contractual relationship” rather than a “manager-managed” relationship in administrative management. In terms of accommodation, students accept the dormitory conditions and management regulations provided by the school and pay the accommodation fees, thereby forming a contract. If students violate relevant regulations or cause losses to others due to their personal fault while staying on campus, they need to bear corresponding responsibility according to the “principle of fault liability” in the Civil Code. This is the spirit of contract and the spirit of the rule of law. Under the contractual management model, students have the right to choose whether to live or not, as well as the right to choose different conditions of dormitory. Adults make their own choices and bear their own responsibilities, which should be the essential essence of the spirit of free education in higher education.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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