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Burnout as an ecological outcome: multi-level systemic pressures on student affairs professionals in China

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Burnout among student affairs professionals (*fudaoyuans*) is a growing concern in Chinese higher education, yet its systemic drivers remain underexplored. While international research has examined burnout in comparable roles, little is known about how China's distinctive governance structures and cultural norms shape this phenomenon. This study applies Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to reconceptualize burnout as an *ecological burnout cascade*, shaped by interlocking pressures across multiple system levels. A qualitative case study was conducted at a provincial Normal University, drawing on semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Findings reveal that *fudaoyuans'* burnout is driven by institutional, ideological, cultural, and temporal contradictions. At the microsystem, emotional exhaustion is exacerbated by "all-round, all-weather" grid governance and digital surveillance. The mesosystem reveals role ambiguity under the dual-track promotion system, fostering professional dislocation. At the exosystem, managerialist imperatives clash with student-centered values, producing depersonalization. Macrosystem analysis shows how marketization reconfigures educators into service workers. Chronosystem pressures—especially age-based "social clock" norms and stagnated career paths—trigger anticipatory burnout, a future-oriented form of stress. Theoretically, this study extends ecological systems theory by introducing the concepts of *ecological burnout cascade* and *anticipatory burnout*, offering a context-sensitive, structural explanation for professional demoralization. It also contributes to global discussions on student affair professionals, hybrid governance, and academic precarity in higher education systems undergoing neoliberal transformation.

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Introduction

Burnout, defined as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach and Leiter 2016), typically stems from a mismatch between expectations, ideals, and work realities (Jackson et al. 1986). It often leads to emotional depletion and psychological overload (Cordes et al. 1997). Studies have consistently demonstrated high burnout rate in educational fields, particularly among professionals who engage in routine face-to-face encounters and those who face high-performance standards (Bing et al. 2022; Carroll et al. 2021; Madigan and Kim 2021; Yeh and Barrington 2023).

Student Affairs Professionals (SAPs) in higher education, who provide academic counseling, advising, and students affairs management, face distinctive burnout risks (McClellan & Stringer 2016; Mullen et al. 2018). These professionals often shoulder “extremely high and sometimes unrealistic demands” and “extreme obligations” from work (Marshall et al. 2016), a situation that has led to concerning levels of occupational stress and emotional exhaustion. Recent studies have reported high rates of potential burnout among SAPs (Anderson 2021; Mullen et al. 2018), with a survey conducted by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators in 2022 indicating a rate as high as 85% (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators 2022). Several stressors contribute to SAPs’ burnout, including high stress work environment (Mullen et al. 2018), significant emotional distress (Anderson, 2021), unclear job description (Patestas 2020). Cater (2019) further summarized those factors into six categories, including: workload, control, reward, community, fairness and values.

In mainland China, Students Affairs Professionals (known as “*fudaoyuan*” in mandarin and henceforth) face unique challenges due to China’s distinct higher education system, which bears both political socialization tasks and academic developing tasks (Du 2018). Described as the “cornerstone of the control regime” (Perry 2015), *fudaoyuans* have been tasked with the ideological and political education since 1950s (Cao et al. 2021; Kumar and Mahazan 2020; Liu et al. 2023; Perry 2015). Over time, their responsibilities have expanded significantly. According to the Ministry of Education’s *Decree No. 43* (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2017), they are expected to act as “life mentor” to fulfill nine core functions, ranging from ideological and political education to daily student management. This multifunctional burden is compounded by the grid governance model that emphasizes “all-round, all-weather and whole-process” management for approximately 200 students per *fudaoyuan* (Kumar and Mahazan 2020; Liu et al. 2023; Sun and Park 2024).

Despite the growing attention to *fudaoyuans*’ psychological well-being, previous studies have largely focused on the individual-level factors related to their burnout, such as self-efficacy, coping strategies, or emotional intelligence (Cao et al. 2021; Chen and Muktar 2022; Jiang et al. 2019, 2019; Song & Zhao 2023; Sun & Park 2024). While these studies offer valuable insights, there remains a need for a more holistic understanding of the factors contributing to this issue, including institutional, social, political factors and so on. To address this gap, the present study adopts Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological system theory, situating developing person within different interconnected systems to highlight the interaction between individuals, settings, and contexts (e.g., Chiarelli-Helminiak et al. 2022; de Lisser et al. 2024; Nation et al. 2020; Newell 2020). Specifically, this study asks:

How do factors at different ecological systems contribute to burnout among fudaoyuans in mainland China?

Through this ecological system lens, this study conceptualizes burnout not merely as an individual or organizational outcome

but as a multi-level, structurally embedded phenomenon. In doing so, this study contributes to the scholarship in the following directions. Theoretically, it enriches international scholarship on SAPs burnout by situating *fudaoyuans*’ cases within a broader theoretical and comparative context. Empirically, it shed light on the operational logic of China’s grid governance model in higher education. Ultimately, this study seeks to foster a more comprehensive understanding of how burnout unfolds in structurally complex environments and to inform policy strategies for promoting professional well-being in the sector.

Literature review

Defining burnout. Burnout is commonly defined as a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach and Jackson 1986). The concept was first introduced by Freudenberger (1974) to describe professions who become emotionally exhausted and incapable of meeting job demands. Maslach & Leiter (2016) later expanded the construct to include physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion. Burnout can result in various subsequent results, including emotional exhaustion, cynicism, low professional efficacy (Singh et al. 2012; Van Dick and Wagner 2001), low productivity and employee morale (Swider and Zimmerman 2010), and physical discomfort such as headaches, gastrointestinal disturbances, anxiety, and depression (Capone et al. 2019). These significant outcomes have prompted extensive inquiry into its causes.

Despite decades of scholarship, the origins of burnout remain contested. Some researchers have emphasized psychological mismatch, such as the dissonance between expectations, ideals, and workplace realities (Jackson et al. 1986). Some scholars have highlighted the nature of work itself, as Maslach & Goldberg (1998) have remarked that burnout is not merely a crisis of interpersonal relationships but a more general crisis related to work itself and Bilge (2006) have pointed to the centrality of intrinsic job satisfaction in influencing burnout. Still, some researchers, like R. Richards et al. (2018), have revealed that personality traits play a crucial role in burnout. Among all these scholars, some have shifted the focus beyond the individual, framing burnout within a multidimensional framework (Maslach and Goldberg 1998).

In such a shift, organizational perspectives have gained prominence. As Fox noted that “individual characteristics do not exist in a social vacuum.... Rather, organizational conditions in the workplace are important for innovative and productive outcomes among individuals” (Fox 2010, p.999). In this way, Fox aligns with the multidimensional theory of burnout which considers both individual and systemic factors (Maslach and Goldberg 1998; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Moreover, Singh et al. (2012) further delineated structural cases such as role ambiguity, erosion of community, absence of fairness, and interpersonal conflicts.

Overall, these studies provide valuable insights into the commonalities and differences in burnout experiences across various systems, and underscore the importance of adopting a holistic and systemic lens to examine not only individual factors but also the broader organizational and societal influences of burnout.

Studies on students affairs professions’ burnout. Among various professions, SAPs have been consistently reported at an alarming rate of burnout globally (Anderson 2021; Dinibutun et al. 2020; Rickey 2024). Several stressors have been identified, including the open-ended nature of this job (Boettcher et al. 2019;

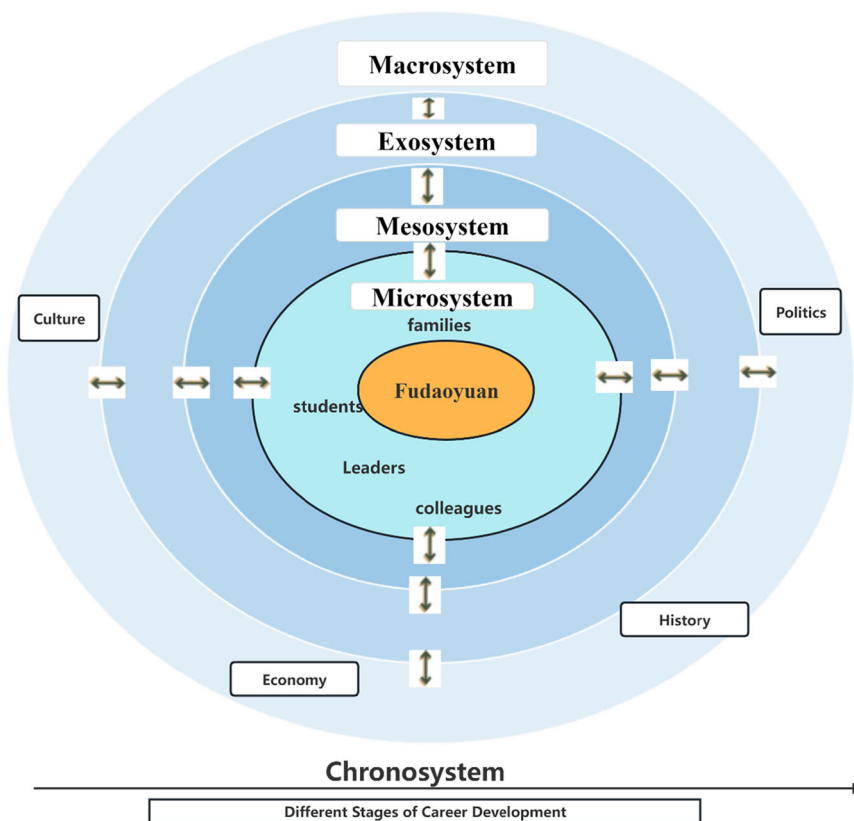


Fig. 1 Analytical Framework Based on Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory.

Martinez 2017; Mullen et al. 2018; Patestas 2020), frequently engaging in high emotionally demanding tasks (Anderson 2021; Davila 2023; Marshall et al. 2016), the organizational policies and practices (Xanthopoulou et al. 2007), limited advancement opportunities and low compensation (Carter 2019), unclear role responsibilities (Boettcher et al. 2019; Campbell et al. 2021; Madigan and Kim 2021) and so on. These findings demonstrate the inherently demanding nature of SAP roles globally.

In mainland China, the role of SAPs is primarily fulfilled by *fudaoyuans*. Since the inception of the role in some specific universities in 1950s, the past decades not only witnessed the rapid growth in population of *fudaoyuan* (Chen and Muktar 2022), but also the width of their responsibilities. At the initial stage, their responsibility focused on the ideological and political education to enhance the socialist values and political socialization among students (Du 2018; Fairbrother 2004; Perry 2015). Over time, their responsibility expands to various other fields, including academic advising, psychological counseling, career guidance, and other student daily management (Kumar & Mahazan 2020; Lan et al. 2018; Li & Fang 2017; Lin 2022). Each *fudaoyuan* oversees around 200 students during their whole college life in an “all-round, all-weather and whole-process” way to ensure them “Red”(political loyalty) and Expert (academic competence) (Du, 2018). Nowadays, *fudaoyuans* have been reported at a high risk of burnout as “social issue”(Chen & Muktar 2022).

Some burnout contributors among *fudaoyuans* mirror those identified globally, including heavy workloads, role conflicts, emotional exhaustion, uncertainty in job responsibilities, and emergency handling (Cao et al. 2021; Chen and Muktar 2022; Jiang et al. 2019; Lan et al. 2018; Song & Zhao 2023). However, scholars also emphasize stressors that are uniquely embedded in the Chinese higher education system. Among these, the structural contradiction of their dual role expectation-ideological education

and student affairs management-are highlighted as the important stressor (Jiang et al. 2019; Sun & Park 2024). As Chen and Muktar (2022) noted, *fudaoyuans* face significant psychological stress from professional ambiguity and societal expectations.

Given the complex interplay of individual, organizational, and societal factors contributing to *fudaoyuans* burnout, it calls for a more holistic approach to understanding and addressing this issue. To bridge this gap, this study adopts Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory.

Understanding the problem from the perspective of ecological systems. Bronfenbrenner (1979) introduced the ecological systems to conceptualize how multiple, interrelated environmental systems shape individual development, ranging from micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chrono-levels as a series of nested circles. This framework has been influential in educational fields to understand the interaction between individuals and their context, offering a nuanced understanding of human psychology and practice (Jackman et al. 2022; Nation et al. 2020).

Recently, scholars have adopted this theory to uncover the phenomenon of burnout (e.g., Chiarelli-Helminiak et al. 2022; de Lisser et al. 2024; Jackman et al. 2022; Newell 2020). For instance, de Lisser et al. (2024) applied the ecological model to explore the interplay between individual, interpersonal, organizational, and policy-level factors in contributing to nurse burnout. These studies demonstrate the potential of the ecological approach to consider the broader cultural, societal, organizational, and personal conditions which burnout may emerges.

Given that *fudaoyuans* are embedded within multi-layered systems, this study adopts the ecological lens to examine how burnout is shaped across different systems of their professional environment (as outlines in Fig. 1).

Table 1 Profile of The Participants.

No.	Gender	Age	Degree/Major	Marital Status	Years of Service	Title
1	female	39	Master's degree/Education	Married	17	Associate professor
2	male	31	Master's degree/Ethnology	Married	6	Lecturer
3	female	36	Doctoral candidate /Education	Married	11	Lecturer
4	female	27	Master's degree/Geological Resources and Geological Engineering	Unmarried	2	Teaching Assistant
5	female	44	Doctor's degree/Theory of Marxism	Married	20	Associate professor
6	male	37	Doctor's degree/Software Engineering	Married	4	Associate professor
7	female	28	Master's Degree/Ideological and Political Education	Married	4	Teaching Assistant
8	female	31	Master's degree/English Language and Literature	Married	6	Lecturer
9	male	26	Master's degree /Communication and Media	Unmarried	1	Teaching Assistant
10	female	38	Master's degree /Psychology	Married	13	Lecturer

- (1) The microsystem, which is the most proximal to a developing person, acknowledges the “activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22). In this study, *fudaoyuans* are surrounded by their students, colleagues, and superiors in their daily work field.
- (2) The mesosystem “comprises the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25). It is the linkages among these microsystems. For *fudaoyuans*, the mesosystem consists of transactions between different microsystems, such as academic departments and student affairs offices.
- (3) The exo-system may “affect or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the [...] person”(Bronfenbrenner 1979, p. 25). In colleges and universities, the broader social system or policy environments affect *fudaoyuans* indirectly.
- (4) Macrosystem, an overarching pattern of ideology and organization of the social institutions common to a particular culture or subculture (Bronfenbrenner 1979, p. 81). Macrosystem for *fudaoyuans* means the societal environment they situate, that like social norms, political mandates values, laws, cultures, etc.
- (5) Chronosystem, “permits one to identify the impact of prior life events and experiences, singly or sequentially, on subsequent development” (Bronfenbrenner 2005, p. 83). *Fudaoyuans* experience differently in their daily work at different professional stages alongside with evolving policies, shifting institutional missions over time.

Accordingly, through the lens of ecological systems theory framework, this study aims to explore how different systems shape *fudaoyuans*' working experience, identify these potential intervention points, and gain insights on the similar burnout challenges faced by SAPs globally.

Methodology

Research design. This study adopts a qualitative case study approach (Creswell and Poth 2016; Merriam 2009; Stake 1995; Yin 2017), guided by ecological system theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979). The case is bounded both spatially (a single provincial university in mainland China) and professionally (the role of *fudaoyuan*), aiming to explore how burnout is shaped by systemic, institutional, and sociocultural factors. Given the complex and multifaceted nature of burnout, this approach enables a rich exploration of the central phenomenon (Merriam 2009). The central research question is:

How do factors at different ecological systems contribute to burnout among *fudaoyuans* in China?

Context, sampling and participants. The current study was conducted at a provincial Normal University in mainland China, selected as a typical case (Yin 2017) for the following reasons: First, it is a comprehensive university with degree programs from junior college to doctoral program with a wide range of disciplines, reflecting a typical sample of Chinese universities. Second, it has an institutional commitment to student affairs, evidenced by its formal *fudaoyuan* professional development center. Third, burnout is an emotionally charged and socially invisible phenomenon, particularly in Chinese organizational culture where expressions of fatigue may signal weakness or disloyalty. In such a case, the researcher's insider identity-as a former *fudaoyuan* with over 10 years of experience and as a researcher now in the same university-was not merely advantageous but methodologically essential, positionality enabled deep rapport, interpretive sensitivity, and access to candid narratives that might otherwise remain suppressed. Purposeful sampling strategy (Patton 2014) was used to recruit ten information-rich participants, selected based on self-identification with stress symptoms, peer referrals, and diversity in job experience, gender, marital status, and academic backgrounds, ensuring a diverse representation that reflects the broader population of *fudaoyuan* in China (see Table 1). Specifically, the *fudaoyuan* position is an official institutional post requiring candidates to voluntarily apply and pass a competitive recruitment process. All participants in this study entered the role through formal application procedures, reflecting an initial willingness to assume the responsibilities of student affairs work.

Data collection. Data were collected over six months through semi-structured interviews, participatory observation and related documents, ensuring methodological triangulation (Creswell and Poth 2016). To capture the full complexity of *fudaoyuans*' experiences, a variety of data collection methods were adopted, including semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, and the collection of work-related documents such as schedules and reports. The triangulation of data was intended to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings.

- (1) Semi-structured interviews. Each participant was interviewed twice, with each session lasting between 40 and 60 min. The first interview was conducted at the beginning of the research to explore the general ideas of counselors' working experiences and feelings, including questions like “Can you describe your daily responsibilities as a *fudaoyuan*?”. The second interview was explicitly conducted to delve deeper into the specific factors contributing to their burnout, including questions like “How do interactions with students impact your energy and emotional state?”. Moreover, with the purpose of “real” data, coupled with the formal interview, there was data from the

Table 2 Coding Samples.

Original excerpt	Initial code	Axial theme	System level
"Even if each student only asks one question a day, I still have to answer over 200. Isn't that exhausting?"	Overwhelming daily student interactions	Interpersonal overload	Microsystem
The academic affairs office doesn't care what we're doing. When they need something, we have to jump.	Unilateral institutional expectations	Cross-departmental disconnection	Mesosystem
It's been getting more intense these years. I'm older now—it's over for me	Age and policy-related career fatigue	Temporal exhaustion and hopelessness	Chronosystem

- casual talks during the observations. With permission, the interview data were audio-recorded and transcribed with the help of NVivo12.0. The interview guide was designed to reflect Bronfenbrenner's five systemic levels (see Appendix).
- (2) Participatory observation. Leveraging the researcher's insider role, naturalistic observations were conducted in various daily settings, including office interactions, student consultations, and team meetings. Informal conversations during these observations further enriched the data. Filed notes were systematically recorded and later coded.
 - (3) Document analysis. The work schedules, meeting logs and other relevant documents were collected to contextualize interview narratives and substantiate observed patterns, ensuring the robustness of the qualitative analysis.

Data analysis. Reflective thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019), was employed as the primary method for identifying and interpreting patterns within the data. Codes were generated inductively and later organized deductively into the ecological theory models. A second coder, a doctoral candidate in higher education familiar with ecological systems theory, independently coded a subset of transcripts. Coding discrepancies were resolved through iterative discussion and consensus, enhancing inter-coder reliability.

During this stage, the researcher invited a second coder, a doctoral candidate in higher education familiar with ecological systems theory, independently coded a subset of transcripts to enhance the validity of coding. Focusing on identifying recurring themes related to burnout, both coders independently coded the data firstly and reconciled those differences by constant comparison and discussion till an agreement. Then, the initial codes were grouped into categories through axial coding, examining the relationships between different themes under the guidance of ecological system theory. Afterwards, constant comparative analysis was used to ensure that the emerging themes were consistent with the theoretical framework (coding examples as outlined in Table 2).

Additionally, to maintain reflexivity, the researcher kept vigilant about the potential for bias, and critically reflected on data collection and analysis processes. Ethical considerations were also important. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, assured of their confidentiality, and provided with the option to withdraw at any time.

Findings and Discussions

This study examines burnout among *fudaoyuans* through Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which frames burnout as a product of multilevel ecological factors within China's unique socio-cultural and institutional context.

Micro-system: emotional exhaustion from "Ever-Accessible" work. In the microsystem, *fudaoyuans* experience persistent emotional exhaustion, which is not simply a result from heavy workload but is deeply rooted in the unpredictability, intrusiveness, and constant

demands of their job, particularly those mediated through digital technological communications such as WeChat. "Ever-accessible", the concept that all the participants mentioned constantly during the interview, captures the blurring of work-life boundaries and psychological detachment, leading to chronic stress and emotional depletion.

Fudaoyuans' formal responsibilities are already dense and multifaceted. As Table 3 illustrates, Participant 7's workday is densely packed with various tasks. Notably, this schedule only includes formally scheduled duties, excluding ad-hoc communications, student crises, or spontaneous leadership directives.

While the formal schedule illustrates the density of tasks, participants repeatedly emphasized that the emotional burden stemmed less from the workload intensity but the "ever-accessibility" of the job, revealing the unpredictability and intrusiveness of off-hour demands. The omnipresent responsibility for the safety and well-being of around 200 students functions as psychological *Damocles' sword*, continuously intensifying the stress experienced by *fudaoyuans*. As Participant 9 stated, "You have no idea what's going to happen the next minute" (09F1023). And Participant 2 recalled an emergency,

Our job has no boundary between on-duty or off-duty. Last night, when I was about to sleep, one of my students reported a sudden breathing difficulty in emergency. I immediately rushed to the hospital to handle the following procedures until 3 a.m." (02F1004).

These disruptions, though sporadic, are frequent enough to make rest itself uncertain—a hallmark of time-based emotional exhaustion (Maslach and Jackson 1981). Furthermore, the modern digital communication technologies like WeChat amplify this constant "ever-accessibility". They transformed *fudaoyuans* into "always-on" professionals, extend their responsibilities into any personal time. This phenomenon aligns closely with Derks and Bakker's (2014) findings that after-hours smartphone use impairs psychological detachment from work, thereby inhibiting emotional recovery and fostering burnout.

From a psychological stress perspective, the inability to delay or control responses strips *fudaoyuans* of effective coping mechanisms (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Many reported suppressing frustration to avoid workplace retaliation, heightening emotional dissonance. Ecologically, this dynamic reflects what Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes as non-reciprocal proximal processes within the microsystem: while *fudaoyuans* provide substantial emotional and temporal energy in student welfare, they receive minimal support or opportunities for psychological recovery. Furthermore, the grid-style governance structure intensifies this condition, under which *fudaoyuans* are responsible for almost everything of their students, from academic guidance to psychological surveillance. While this ever-accessible digital labor reshapes the temporal contours of *fudaoyuans'* work, the erosion of boundaries is further exacerbated by the role conflicts embedded in the mesosystem, where they must navigate competing demands from institutional hierarchies, students, and their own personal lives.

Table 3 Schedule of Participant No.7 on a Typical Working Day (Extracted from Work Log).

Time	Event	Location
8:30-9:30	Preliminary examination meeting for outstanding students	Office 407
10:00-11:30	Identification work for students with financial difficulties	Office 415
12:00-13:00	Career consultation with a student	Campus dining hall
14:10-16:00	Political education class on national policy	Classroom A101
16:00-18:00	Daily administrative work	Office 416
19:00-20:00	Selection meeting for students' New Year performance	students' activities center

Meso-system: professional dislocation within dual-track system. Building on the emotional exhaustion from “ever-accessible” work discussed in last section, this section explores how the mesosystem intensifies burnout through conflicting institutional expectations. Specifically, the dual-track promotion system positions *fudaoyuans* at the intersection of two distinct bureaucratic logics: the administrative and the academic, which exacerbate their identity uncertainty and psychological strain.

Theoretically, this policy was designed to enhance the social status and career prospects of *fudaoyuans*, offering two advancement paths: one through administrative ranks (mirroring civil service hierarchies that highlight political engagement and bureaucratic responsibilities) and the other through academic titles progressing from “teaching assistant” to “professor”(highlight scholarly publications) (Chen and Muktar 2022; Sun and Park 2024). However, *fudaoyuans*’ hybrid roles hardly fulfill the formal criteria of either track in reality. This structural mismatch generates the role ambiguity and conflicts. Participant 6 remarked,

Our position is incredibly awkward. I cannot clearly define myself as a teacher or not. On one hand, we have no formal teaching responsibilities. On the other hand, we are not part of the college’s administrative system. So, who are we? (06F1102).

This persistent identity uncertainty exemplifies the professional dislocation inherent in the dual-track system, particularly in the promotion process. Participant 8 explained,

I find myself struggling on both fronts. With my master’s degree in English Language and Literature, I lack the qualifications to compete in the political discourse that dominates the *fudaoyuan* track. Conversely, within the English academic track, I am also at a disadvantage compared to other teachers who specialize in English. Additionally, if I ever want to transition to a full-time English teaching position in the future, I need to promote my professional title from bottom-up. Thus, the direction I choose now is critical. But honestly, this feels like a distant goal for me. (08F1204)

Furthermore, *fudaoyuans* occupy precarious positions within the administrative hierarchy, often relegated to the lowest rank while shouldering responsibilities across numerous departments in the university. Participant 7 described her role as a “lowest handyman” responsible for “everything related to students” (07F1023), illustrating the fragmented and overextended nature of their duties. Similarly, participant 10 detailed her overwhelming daily workload,

This year, I am responsible of the freshmen, and we are currently overseeing their military training. Simultaneously, the deputy secretary assigned me the entrance education duties, the educational administration office needed help distributing textbooks, the psychological counseling center

required me to conduct psychological assessment for each student, the college hospital notified me of the need for physical exam, the college library instructed me to hand out the students’ library cards, and the youth league committee asked me to manage the selection of work-study program students right now. Honestly, I am exhausted. (10F0915).

Due to the structural constraints of the meso-system, *fudaoyuans* find themselves embedded in and constrained by the two bureaucratic systems, struggling to navigate conflicting roles within a rigid hierarchical framework. As prior studies noted, role ambiguity reduces clarity on expected behaviors and evaluation criteria, and role conflict stems from different institutional logics are imposed at the same time (Ahmad et al. 2021; Papastyliaou et al. 2009). Both role ambiguity and role conflicts are likely linked to psychological strain and burnout(Maslach & Leiter 2016; Xanthopoulou et al. 2007; Xu 2019). In this way, the dual-track system positions *fudaoyuans* at a dilemma intersection between bureaucratic-political and academic-professional demands, exemplifying competing institutional logics (Thornton et al. 2012), and contribute to fragmented identities and diminishing access to resources critical for well-being (Bakker and Demerouti 2017). Overall, the professional dislocation compounds the emotional exhaustion within the microsystem level, constraining *fudaoyuans*’ coping capacity and reinforcing burnout risk within broader organizational and cultural contexts.

Exo-system: depersonalization under the logic of managerialism. At the exo-system level, *fudaoyuans* operate within institutional environments heavily influenced by national mandates and bureaucratic structures. As Bronfenbrenner (1979) noted, the exosystem serves as a translation layer. These factors, while not directly involving, significantly shape *fudaoyuans* daily practices and working conditions. One of the most prominent manifestations of this is the logic of managerialism, which reframes educational labor through the lens of instrumental rationality, key performance indicators (KPIs), and procedural compliance(Clarke and Newman 1997; Deem 1998).

Despite official rhetoric emphasizing “student-centeredness”, participants reported that their work was assessed through quantifiable metrics, ranging from students’ daily attendance checks and counseling satisfaction logs to macro-level targets like graduation timelines and post-employment rates. Participant 2 remarked the frustration,

We are punching bags in the university. The slogan says “for every student, and everything of the student,” but in reality, it’s “follow all the rules”. (02F1010)

This irony reflects a broader symbolic dissonance between institutional mission statements and lived work realities. Managerial protocols often reduce complex emotional labor into reportable outputs, subordinating student well-being to data compliance.

Furthermore, as both political educators and personal mentors, *fudaoyuans* are expected to embody contradictory emotional

Table 4 Observation of Carrer Counseling.

Time/Location	Participants	Observation	Emotions	Reflection
Dec 04, 2024, 16:00-16:30/ fudaoyuan's office	No. 8 fudaoyuan; student S1(Senior, male)	No. 8 interrupted many times and urged S1 to find a job first rather than to take a gap year. S1 insisted to prepare the exam for post-graduate students entrance exam in the following years.	No. 8: a little bit anxious and indifferent; S1: frustrated and disappointed	What is the purpose of this counseling?

orientations. On one hand, as the front agents of ideological and political education in colleges and universities, *fudaoyuans* take the role as ideological transmitters demands composed and formal affect to enhance all the students “Red”. Field notes provide a vivid depiction of this tension:

During a regular monthly meeting with students, participant No. 8 maintained a serious and composed demeanor, a stark contrast to her usual image. With the party emblem displayed on her chest, she explains the national policies for all the students here. (FN1102)

On the other side, *fudaoyuans* are also expected to be life mentors for around 200 students, which demands deep emotional engagement in their daily interactions. However, each *fudaoyuan* is challenged for consistent emotional empathy. The gap between student needs and institutional metrics leads to moral dissonance and emotional suppression, key hallmarks of depersonalization (Maslach and Jackson 1986). Hochschild (2012) emphasizes that such emotional suppression, known as surface acting, would intensifies burnout by creating emotional dissonance between inner states and behaviors. A daily observation of career counseling and stimulated interview highlight the dilemma (as outlined in Table 4),

Participant 8 shared his internal conflict during the stimulated interview, which reveal how bureaucratic surveillance extends even into the most relational aspects of *fudaoyuans*’ work,

I am responsible for 317 senior students. Before graduation, all the leaders asked us to push students to find jobs to raise our employment stats. Yet I understood some students had different plans, but I couldn’t support them. (08F1204)

Such observations exemplify what Weber (1978) referred as the “iron cage” of rational authority, where professional judgment is subjugated to procedural accountability, mirroring the feelings of being a “punching bag” (02F1010). In such a way, the exo-system’s managerialism fosters depersonalization to urge *fudaoyuans* prioritize quantifiable tasks over student well-being. This erosion of discretionary space echoes the notion of jurisdictional conflict (Abbott 1986), revealing the satiation that frontline professionals lose control over their own practice when institutional policies expand their scope. Similarly, the intensification of managerialism governance mirrors neoliberal reforms in other contexts (Ball 2012). In higher educational fields, Giroux (2014) highlights how neoliberal policies, practices have radically reshaped the mission of universities. Yet, the centralized administrative structures in mainland China magnify this effect of this governance model. For *fudaoyuans*, these institutional tensions within the exo-system are further compounded by macro-system factors discussed in the following section.

Macro-system: loss of meaning in the market logic of education. Building on the managerialism factors discussed in exo-system section, the macro-system reveals a deeper ideological transformation: the entrenchment of market logic in Chinese higher education. As Bronfenbrenner (1979) conceptualized, the

macro-system refers to the overarching cultural, ideological, or broader societal factors. In China’s context, this has manifested in the normalization of efficiency discourse, performance metrics, and commodification of education (Mok 2013), embedding market rationalities within a nominally collectivist educational discourse.

Since the early 2000s, market-driven principles have increasingly permeated institutional expectations, partly through symbolic yet expansive policies (MoE 2017). These policies formalize an expansion of *fudaoyuans*’ responsibilities under the normative umbrella of “all-round education”, including ideological instruction, psychological support, career counseling and so on, without clear role boundaries or resource calibration. Participant 4 shared:

I have been a fudaoyuan for five years. The feelings of this work can be summarized as “busy”. I am just like a waiter or a nanny, always ready to serve every student. My students have become my boss, and they can ask anything from me at any time. (04F1022)

This “waiter or nanny” metaphor vividly captures the erosion of the educator’s moral authority and the reconstitution of *fudaoyuan* as service provider, a pattern consistent with Marginson’s (2013) critique of marketization in higher education. Participants repeatedly reported that their daily work was increasingly shaped by student satisfaction scores and complaint prevention, cultivating what could be termed a “customer-oriented bureaucracy”. The teacher-student relationship has been recalibrated into a transactional dynamic, wherein the educational mandate is subordinated to performative service delivery.

The consequences are not merely symbolic. The weakening of educational authority is acutely felt in disciplinary scenarios, where *fudaoyuans* often hesitate to enforce rules. As Participant No.3 mentioned,

I’ve started turning a blind eye to their mistakes after the incident, as you know. It’s not worth the risk anymore. (03F1012)

This statement follows a public backlash after she disciplined a student for cheating-an incident that led to parental via social media, university inaction, and online harassment. The emotional toll of maintaining composure while receiving no institutional backing epitomizes the emotional labor (Hochschild 2012). As other participant echoed similarly, institutional responses to crises are often symbolic and reputationally driven, rather than real supportive.

Also, the invasion of market logic is not only true in China. Similar performance-driven, market-oriented university system are reported in other contexts (e.g., Bendixen and Jacobsen 2017; Guthrie and Neumann 2007). Yet in China, the convergence of state policy and global neoliberalism intensifies what Weber (1978) termed the iron cage of rationality, where care work becomes routinized, disenchanting, and governed by audit culture. For *fudaoyuans*, this dynamic erodes professional purpose, moral authority, and emotional resilience. This perceived “loss of meaning” marks not just a subjective sense of fatigue, but a structural consequence of marketized educational governance,

undermining *fudaoyuans'* sense of purpose, value, and long-term engagement.

The chrono-system: temporal pressures, age ideologies, and identity erosion. The chrono-system, which situates individual development within temporal trajectories, accentuates how cumulative life events, institutional timelines, and age-based expectations shape professional identity over time (Bronfenbrenner 1979). *Fudaoyuans* are particularly vulnerable to the psychological toll of temporal pressures within China's higher education ecology. Compound with other factors discussed in earlier section, these pressures intensifying their burnout experience.

Initially, *fudaoyuans* are drawn to the profession out of self-sense of idealism and "students' mentor" commitment, yet often experience gradual disillusionments as their work is framed more by compliance, workload intensification and performance quotas. Notably, this erosion of purpose is deeply entangled with age norms and career-stage anxieties. This narrative of youthfulness as central to effective "teacher-student empathy" mirrors the concept of "social clock"—a set of societal milestones regarding when individuals should achieve professional success (Ng and Feldman 2014, 2015). In China, this is exacerbated by the "35+ phenomenon" or "age discrimination", where employees over 35 are frequently perceived as less adaptable and face structural barriers to advancement (Hou et al. 2024; Jia et al. 2022; Wang and Sun 2025). As Participant No.10 remarked her experience,

To be honest, I feel a constant sense of anxiety. There are very few people over 40 in our job. I am already 38, and I know I am too late to plan my future. I either secure the title of associate professor title or transition into another administration. I cannot imagine doing the same job until retirement. The phone ringing in the middle of the night makes my heart race, worrying that a student might be in trouble. (10F0407)

Even younger *fudaoyuan* internalize these age-based pressure. The following quote from participant 7, age 28, vividly captures how perceived deviation from the social clock triggers anticipatory burnout (Ng and Feldman 2015).

I have worked for four years after my master degree, but I am still a teaching assistant. My postgraduate classmates have moved ahead, while I feel stuck. When my child is older, I will be 35. I really do not know what my future holds. (07F0408)

This early-onset anxiety illustrates how the "35+ phenomenon"—a culturally embedded form of age discrimination—reshapes career expectation and professional self-perception. Literally, the national policies ostensibly support long-term career development, such as double-track promotion policy, yet implementation often turn them into sources of frustration rather than empowerment. As noted earlier in 4.3 section, these are often rationalized as "necessary governance," but result in compliance overload (Weber 1978). Theoretically, national policy outlines four main career trajectories for *fudaoyuans*, known as "transition-specialization-promotion-deployment" (zhuan-zuan-ti-pai in Chinese) framework: transitioning to a teaching position (zhuan); promotion within their current role to become a professional *fudaoyuan* with higher academic title (-zuan); promotion within an administrative leadership role (ti); or reassignment to another institutional branch (pai). However, with the exception of professional specialization path, each option implicitly signals a departure from the *fudaoyuan* identity. This policy design suggests that the role is not meant to be a

long-term professional destination but rather a transitional phase—especially for those approaching or exceeding certain age thresholds.

In sum, the chrono-system reveals how *fudaoyuans* are caught in a paradox: institutionally essential yet professionally precarious. Compound with the age discrimination in the culture (Hou et al. 2024; Jia et al. 2022; Wang and Sun 2025), *fudaoyuans* burnout is exacerbated especially around the age of 35, which call for meaningful interventions.

Ecological burnout cascade: interlocking mechanisms across systemic layers. While prior sections have explored how burnout emerges within each layer of ecological system, this section highlights that the interactions of these systems to amplify *fudaoyuans* burnout. These findings and discussions highlight the ecological burnout cascade, highlighting a progressive chain of stressors shaped by interlocking systemic forces rather than isolated variables.

At the microsystem, the grid governance mandates "all-round, all-weather" availability, requiring *fudaoyuan* to manage 200 students' safety and well-being around the clock (Chen and Muktar 2022). This institutional "ever-accessibility" is amplified by digital intrusion, eroding work-life boundaries. One *fudaoyuan* noted, "We are always online, always available, and yet increasingly invisible" (05F1013). Participant 2 recalled rushing to a hospital at 3 a.m. for a student's emergency, highlighting relentless demands (02F1004).

The mesosystem compounds this strain though role ambiguity under the dual-track system exacerbates stress, with "Red" ideological duties clashing with "Expert" advising (Du 2018). The tension between these tracks creates daily uncertainty over identity, performance metrics and long-term goals, as participant 6 stated, "I cannot define myself as a teacher or administrator" (06F1102).

The Exo-systemic introduces regulatory contradictions that intensify this role conflict, particularly in some events that institutional demands conflict with the students' needs. Just as the observation of career counseling between participant 8 and S1, while *fudaoyuan* may empathize with S1's desire to take a gap year for preparation, he is simultaneously held accountable for institutional employment rates, leading to a phenomenon of institutional isomorphism where moral guidance is reduced to measurable outcomes (DiMaggio and Powell 2010).

At the macrosystem level, state ideology and market logic converge to redefine the *fudaoyuan's* role. On one hand, they are expected to deliver ideological education. On the other hand, they are positioned as customer-responsible service agents. As participant 4 remarked, "I feel like a waiter or a nanny—students are my boss" (04F1022). The erosion of *fudaoyuans* professional authority fosters emotional labor and symbolic devaluation, consistent with critiques of neoliberal education (Ball 2012; Giroux 2014).

The chronosystem introduces a temporal dimension to this burnout cascade. In the long-term career trajectories, *fudaoyuans* experience not only present fatigue but anticipatory burnout in the unique culture. Under the "social clocks" (Ng and Feldman 2015), *fudaoyuans* are experiencing a future-oriented anxiety driven by age norms, stalled mobility, and institutional transience. As participant 7 outlines her pressure, "I will be 35. I really do not know what my future holds" (07F0408).

Together, these cross-systemic stressors interact through recursive proximal processes, repeated, high-stakes interactions with structurally embedded contradictions. These are not merely additive pressures but mutually reinforcing mechanisms that produce emotional depletion, identity fragmentation, and career demoralization.

Placing *fudaoyuans* in a global comparative context further clarifies the systemic uniqueness. While U.S. student affairs

professionals' benefit from clearer role boundaries and credentialing systems (Cox et al. 2015), Canadian SAPs with CACUSS training (Seifert 2014), or Japanese SAPs with student-centered roles (Hayashi et al. 2023), *fudaoyuans* are uniquely vulnerable under the combination of institutional ambiguity and temporal urgency renders.

Conclusions

This study reframes *fudaoyuans* burnout as an ecological cascade, a multi-level phenomenon shaped by the interplay of grid governance model (Kumar and Mahazan 2020; Sun and Park 2024), blurred role boundaries, bureaucratic assessments, marketization, and age-related anxieties. These interlocking pressures culminate in “anticipated burnout”, a future-oriented, emotionally taxing state not fully captured by Maslach & Jackson’s (1986) classical framework. This anticipatory dimension resonates with the “35+ phenomenon” (Jia et al. 2022; Wang and Sun 2025).

Theoretically, this research extends Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological system theory by emphasizing the recursive and compounding effects among different levels over time. In doing so, it bridges ecological thinking with the mechanisms of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 2010) and cumulative resource depletion (Bakker and Demerouti 2017), illustrating how systemic demands exhaust individual coping capacity. Together, these mechanisms culminate in a distinctive pattern of anticipated burnout, extending Maslach & Jackson (1981) framework by capturing future-oriented stress shaped by aging pressures (Hou et al. 2024; Jia et al. 2022).

Empirically, this study illuminates the unique institutional ecology of China’s higher education, where *fudaoyuans* are positioned within a hybrid regime that fuses ideological governance, bureaucratic management, and neoliberal performance logic. Compared to SAPs in other contexts (Campbell et al. 2021; Davila 2023; Kaniki and Kaniki 2021; Mullen et al. 2018), this study contributes to the international understandings of how SAPs’ burnout is shaped by broader political and cultural structures.

Practically, the findings suggest urgent policy interventions. As revealed in this study, the paradoxical situation of double-track promotion policy should consider revising for a clearer career development to better align with the realities of *fudaoyuans*’ work. Then educational institutions are supposed to create a more supportive work environment that clearly delineate work hours and provide them with resources for managing emotional labor. Given the findings related to the chronosystem, institutions also should offer career planning and support services tailored to different stages of *fudaoyuans*’ career.

Additionally, for individuals, *fudaoyuans* are supposed to acknowledge professional burnout and actively address it, such as engaging in continuous professional development to enhance skills and adaptability, participating in professional communities, developing personal strategies for stress management and so on.

This study is not without limitations. Based on ten participants within an individual institution in mainland China, its generalizability remains constrained. Future research may explore cross-institutional and longitudinal patterns of burnout, with closer attention to gendered experiences and institutional diversity. Nevertheless, by situating *fudaoyuan* burnout within an ecological framework, this study offers a powerful lens for rethinking professional well-being in education systems increasingly marked by hybrid governance, market logics, and temporal anxieties.

Data availability

The qualitative data underlying this study (interview transcripts, observation notes, and institutional policy documents) contain information that could compromise the privacy of participants

and the confidentiality agreements under which the data were collected. Therefore, the full dataset cannot be made publicly available. Anonymized excerpts relevant to the analysis are provided in the article and its supplementary materials. Researchers who meet the criteria for access to confidential data may contact the corresponding author to discuss potential data sharing under a formal data use agreement.

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Author contributions

T. H. conceived and designed the study; developed the theoretical framework and research design; conducted fieldwork and collected qualitative and documentary data; performed coding and thematic analysis; created the visual framework and figures; drafted the manuscript; revised the manuscript in response to reviewer and editor feedback; ensured the accuracy and integrity of all data and interpretations; managed all aspects of project administration and compliance; secured necessary institutional and ethical approvals from Sichuan Normal University.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

This study received ethical approval from the Ethics Review Committee of the School of Foreign Languages, Sichuan Normal University (Approval No.: 20230905; approval date: 05 September 2023). The approval covered all procedures involving human participants (i.e., semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis). All research was performed in accordance with institutional guidelines and the Declaration of Helsinki.

Informed consent

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants between 6 and 12 September 2023, prior to the commencement of each interview session. The consent process included an explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and participants' rights, including voluntary participation, the option to withdraw at any time without penalty, and assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. Consent forms were signed in duplicate, with one copy retained by the participant and the other securely stored by the researcher in a password-protected archive. All personal identifiers were removed during transcription and analysis.

Additional information

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