



Professional identity and burnout among college teachers under China's up-or-out policy: The role of psychological safety climate

Baoqin Gong¹, Yan Li²

¹School of Marxism, Xi'an Siyuan University, People's Republic of China

²School of Marxism, Dalian Polytechnic University, and Faculty of Education, Beijing Normal University, People's Republic of China

How to cite: Gong, B., & Li, Y. (2025). Professional identity and burnout among college teachers under China's up-or-out policy: The role of psychological safety climate. *Social Behavior and Personality: An international journal*, 53(6), e14413

While existing studies have focused on the influence of professional identity on teacher burnout, they have paid less attention to elucidating the underlying mechanisms between these two constructs. The implementation of a tenure-track system has raised significant concerns and instigated career anxiety among college teachers in China. As such, we sought to deepen understanding of the interplay between teachers' professional identity and burnout under an up-or-out policy by investigating the moderating role of psychological safety climate. A sample of 193 college teachers from China participated in this research. The results revealed a higher prevalence of burnout among female teachers compared to their male counterparts, with psychological safety climate augmenting the negative association between teachers' professional identity and burnout. Thus, educational institutions should facilitate the cultivation of professional identity among teachers and establish a psychologically safe climate.

Keywords

professional identity, teacher burnout, psychological safety climate, up-or-out policy, tenure-track system

Article Highlights

- Female college teachers were found to experience higher burnout compared to their male counterparts under China's up-or-out policy.
- Psychological safety climate augmented the negative association between teachers' professional identity and burnout.
- Educational institutions should facilitate the cultivation of professional identity among teachers and establish a psychologically safe climate.

Burnout encompasses emotional exhaustion, a diminished sense of personal accomplishment, and depersonalization, resulting from an individual's inability to effectively manage occupational stressors, and it is particularly prevalent in the teaching profession (Madigan et al., 2023). Teaching is acknowledged as a highly stressful occupation, placing educators at risk of burnout symptoms (Hagermoser Sanetti et al., 2021). Against the backdrop of global competitiveness, the Chinese government has delegated personnel management authority to higher education institutions to align faculty recruitment and management with institutional development needs (Cai, 2010). This transition has replaced the traditional system of ensuring lifelong job security within government-owned enterprises in China (Berkowitz et al., 2014), with a competitive, market-oriented employment system in Chinese universities. Many leading institutions have adopted a tenure-track system akin to the U.S. publish-or-perish model, incorporating an up-or-out approach where academics failing to meet promotion criteria during the probationary period may not have their contracts renewed (T. Wang et al., 2023; Z. Zhang, 2021). While the up-or-out policy has successfully identified

outstanding talents, it has also intensified career-related anxiety among faculty members (Tian & Jiang, 2022), contributing to increased burnout (Xia et al., 2022). Therefore, identifying protective factors and exploring mechanisms to prevent burnout among teachers under this policy framework is crucial.

Professional identity refers to individuals' perception of the societal worth and objectives inherent in their professional engagements (Nixon, 1996). Recent studies have underscored professional identity as pivotal in mitigating teacher burnout (Y. Lin et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2020). For instance, Y. Lin et al. (2022) described the critical role of professional identity in predicting teacher burnout. Similarly, Zhao et al. (2020) identified a significant negative correlation between teachers' professional identity and burnout, arguing that when educators find their profession compelling and recognize its societal value, they are less susceptible to experiencing job-related fatigue.

According to social identity theory, individuals habitually compare themselves with similar groups to ascertain their acknowledgement and status within the collective (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). In this context, strong identification with one's professional role integrates professional identity deeply into one's self-concept (Fitzgerald, 2020), closely linking self-esteem and self-worth with professional achievements, performance, and reputation (Gómez-Jorge & Díaz-Garrido, 2023). Thus, educators who strongly identify with their professional role are more likely to derive purpose and meaning from their work, fostering intrinsic motivation that diminishes burnout (Lavy, 2022).

However, the implementation of the tenure-track system in Chinese colleges and universities has been associated with various adverse outcomes concerning research performance, teaching effectiveness, and personal well-being (X. Wang & Wang, 2023). Liu et al. (2012) demonstrated that tenure-track faculty often experience prolonged work hours and heightened stress levels to fulfill contractual obligations, potentially leading to physical ailments such as insomnia and gastritis. A survey conducted among faculty members from 21 prominent research universities in China highlighted that the tenure track has amplified job insecurity, primarily attributable to increased publication demands and rigorous adherence to up-or-out policy, thereby intensifying apprehensions about job stability (Yang et al., 2024). Thus, Yang et al. (2024) advocated for the establishment of a more secure environment to mitigate faculty job insecurity associated with the tenure track.

In an organizational context, *psychological safety* denotes a shared belief in mutual respect and trust among individuals, fostering an environment where individuals feel secure to express thoughts and concerns without fear of repercussions (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). This climate enables educators to openly communicate, collaborate, and seek assistance within their professional setting, promoting a supportive and inclusive atmosphere conducive to engagement and learning (Johnson et al., 2020). Within such environments, faculty members may openly address concerns related to up-or-out policies and seek guidance from peers and mentors. This collaborative support structure serves to alleviate pressures and challenges, thereby reducing the likelihood of burnout (Ghanizadeh & Jahedizadeh, 2015). Conversely, a lack of psychological safety in the workplace has been linked to increased burnout among faculty (Zhou & Chen, 2021).

In this study we proposed that a psychologically safe climate would moderate the relationship between professional identity and burnout. When teachers have a high perception of psychological safety in their work environment, the impact of professional identity on burnout is likely to be stronger. High levels of psychological safety climate allow teachers to feel confident that their behaviors are safe (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). In such a work environment, it is possible for teachers to maintain their professional identity in the face of potential stressors and challenges (Zhu, 2012), which, in turn, causes them to perceive lower levels of burnout.

Drawing on established theories and empirical findings, in this study we explored the moderating effect of psychological safety climate on the relationship between college teachers' professional identity and burnout under the up-or-out policy. Moreover, despite the societal emphasis on gender equality, it is evident that women in China assume a larger role in family dynamics and bear greater family responsibilities (Song & Ji, 2020), potentially resulting in higher levels of burnout among female teachers in comparison to their male counterparts (Li & Yao, 2017). Therefore, we proposed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Under the up-or-out policy, burnout rates among female college teachers will be higher than those among

male college teachers.

Hypothesis 2: Psychological safety climate will moderate the negative relationship between college teachers' professional identity and burnout under the up-or-out policy, such that this relationship will be stronger (vs. weaker) for those reporting a high (vs. low) psychological safety climate.

The research model is shown in Figure 1.

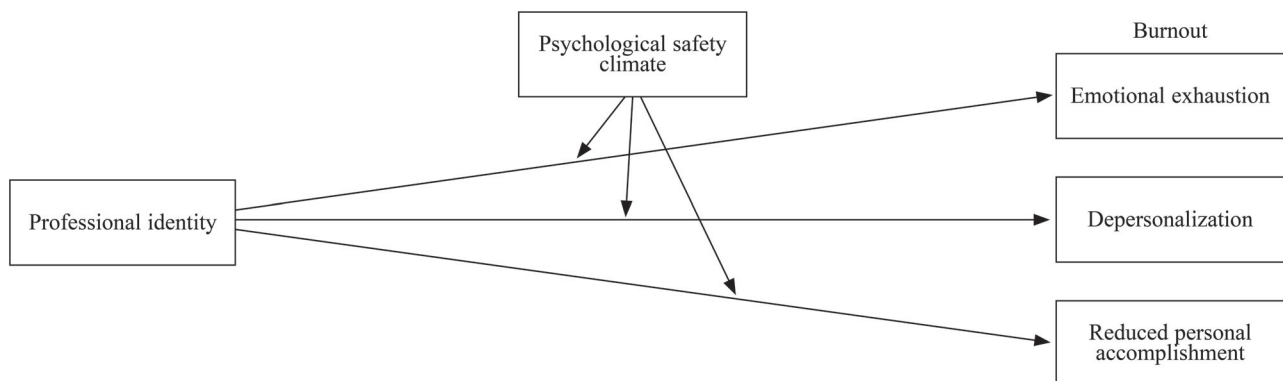


Figure 1. *Research Model*

Method

Participants and Procedure

As tenure-track reforms in China have predominantly been implemented by top research universities, the scope of our survey was confined to what the Chinese government terms *double first-class universities*, that is, first-class universities teaching first-class subjects. We targeted nine universities, compiled the email addresses of their faculty members, and disseminated questionnaires via email without offering any form of incentives. Participants voluntarily completed the questionnaire and were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Within the questionnaire, a screening question “Are you on the tenure track?” was included, prompting respondents who answered affirmatively to proceed with the survey and those who did not to discontinue. We distributed 1,527 questionnaires and collected 193 valid responses, for a valid recovery rate of 12.64%. The sample comprised 125 women and 68 men, with a mean age of 30.17 years ($SD = 2.24$), all of whom possessed a doctoral degree.

Measures

We adopted scales developed in previous studies, with all items being rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

We measured professional identity with Y. Zhang et al.’s (2016) scale, which includes 15 items divided across three dimensions: intrinsic value identity (seven items, e.g., “I think being a teacher is a rewarding profession”), extrinsic value identity (three items, e.g., “I think teachers’ social status is high”), and volitional behavior identity (five items, e.g., “If I choose to be a teacher in the future, I will choose to work as a teacher all my life”). We measured psychological safety climate with Shao et al.’s (2017) three-item scale. A sample item is “I think I am safe from punishment when making mistakes in the team.” We measured the three dimensions of burnout with X. Lin’s (2011) Teacher Burnout Scale: emotional exhaustion (six items, e.g., “I feel emotionally drained from my work”), depersonalization (four items, e.g., “My enthusiasm for my work has worn off”), and reduced personal accomplishment (six items, e.g., “When I finish something, I don’t get excited about it”). Additionally, we controlled for gender (0 = men, 1 = women) and age (in years) in the current study.

Results

Descriptive and Correlational Analysis

The results of the descriptive and correlational analyses are presented in Table 1. The findings revealed negative correlations between burnout and psychological safety climate, and between burnout and teachers' professional identity. Furthermore, teachers' professional identity exhibited a positive relationship with psychological safety climate.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics, Correlations, and Cronbach's Alpha Values*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α	1	2	3	4	5
1. Professional identity	3.30	0.86	.90	1				
2. Psychological safety climate	2.48	1.13	.95	-.26**	1			
3. Emotional exhaustion	3.06	1.45	.90	-.43**	-.42**	1		
4. Depersonalization	3.15	1.49	.86	-.48**	-.33**	.57**	1	
5. Reduced personal accomplishment	3.13	1.48	.88	-.47**	-.34**	.59**	.52**	1

Note. ** $p < .01$.

Confirmatory Factor Analyses

The five-factor model demonstrated a good fit to the data, $\chi^2/df = 2.31$, root-mean-square error of approximation = .07, comparative fit index = .95. The composite reliability values exceeded .70, and the average variance extracted values surpassed .50, indicating satisfactory reliability and validity of our measures.

Hypothesis Testing

Initially, we conducted an independent samples t test to explore potential differences in the burnout dimensions between male and female teachers. Table 2 shows that the three burnout dimensions were related to the gender of the participants. Male and female teachers differed significantly on each burnout dimension, and female teachers perceived higher burnout levels than male teachers did. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Table 2. *Gender Differences in Burnout*

Burnout dimension	<i>M</i>		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	Male	Female		
Emotional exhaustion	1.65	3.83	16.25	< .001
Depersonalization	1.71	3.93	15.48	< .001
Reduced personal accomplishment	1.72	3.90	15.02	< .001

Subsequently, to assess the moderating effect of psychological safety climate, we performed three multiple regression analyses. Emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment were utilized as dependent variables in Models 1, 2, and 3, respectively. Table 3 shows that there were positive associations between gender and all three dimensions of burnout, further supporting Hypothesis 1. Additionally, the coefficients of the interaction terms in the three models were significant, thus supporting Hypothesis 2.

Table 3. Results of Regression Analysis

	Model 1: Emotional exhaustion			Model 2: Depersonalization			Model 3: Reduced personal accomplishment		
	β	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>
Age	-.03	0.04	-0.54	-.00	0.04	-0.06	-.05	0.04	-0.76
Gender	.45**	0.22	6.10	.47**	0.23	6.35	.44**	0.23	5.90
Professional identity	-.27**	0.13	-3.58	-.26**	0.13	-3.52	-.29**	0.13	-3.73
Psychological safety climate	-.34**	0.09	-4.87	-.27**	0.09	-3.79	-.31**	0.09	-4.25
Professional identity $\times$ Psychological safety climate	-.16*	0.09	2.37	-.21**	0.09	-3.05	-.22**	0.09	-3.13
<i>R</i> ²	.67			.67			.66		
<i>F</i>	37.48**			37.35**			37.06**		

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

A graphical representation of the moderating effect is depicted in Figure 2, illustrating that the relationships between professional identity and the three dimensions of burnout were more pronounced when psychological safety climate was high, and weaker when psychological safety climate was low.

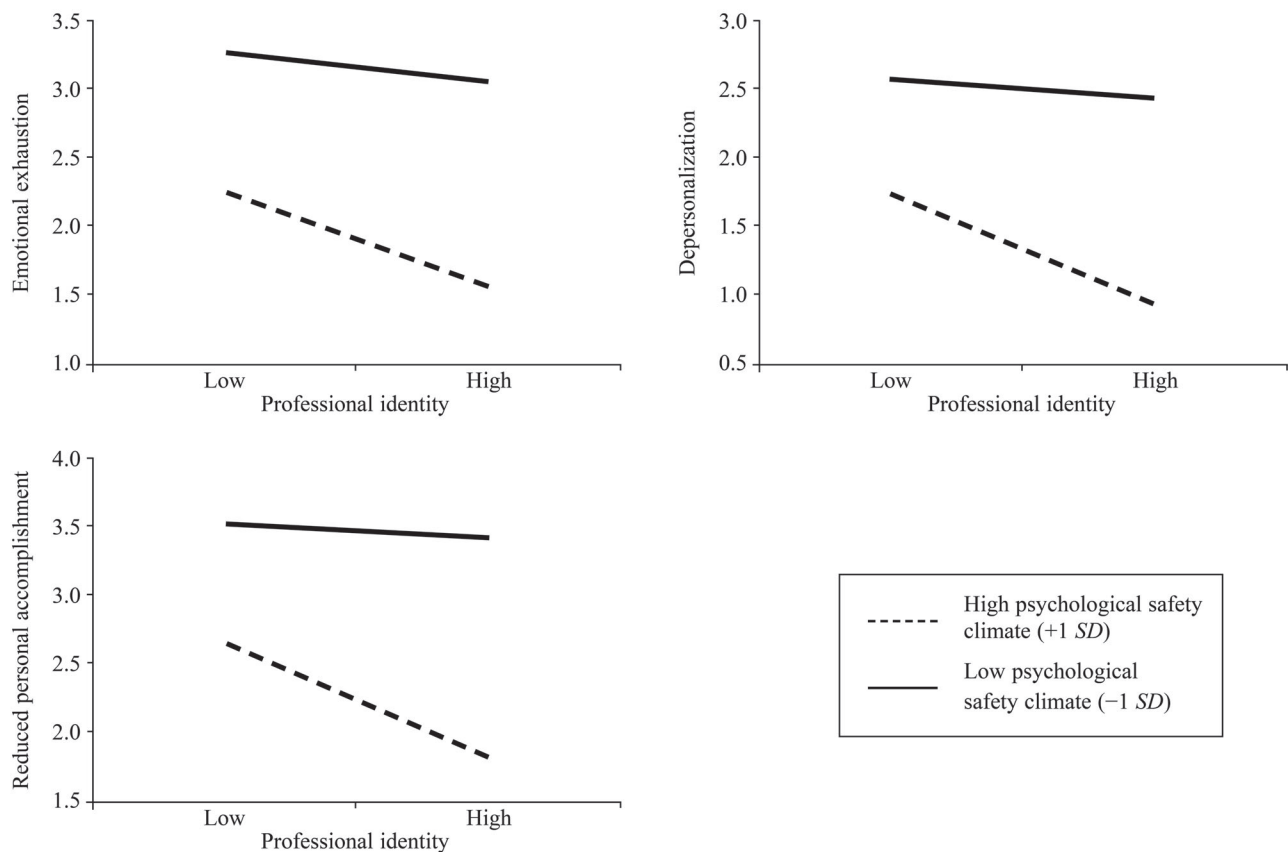


Figure 2. Moderating Effect of Psychological Safety Climate

Discussion

In the current study we addressed a significant yet underexplored question in the academic literature concerning the role of psychological safety climate in the association between teachers' professional identity and burnout, particularly within the context of the up-or-out policy. With a sample of college teachers in China, our findings revealed elevated levels of burnout among female teachers, with psychological safety climate strengthening the connection between teachers' professional identity and burnout.

Theoretical Implications

The results highlighted a significant contrast in burnout levels between male and female teachers, aligning with the findings of Li and Yao (2017), who underscored the heightened burnout experienced by female college teachers compared to their male counterparts. Li and Yao found that female teachers in higher education not only contend with similar job pressures as male teachers but also shoulder the responsibility of nurturing the next generation as mothers. Thus, under an up-or-out policy, female teachers face a heightened risk and severity of burnout.

Furthermore, we found that the strength of the relationship between professional identity and teacher burnout depends on the level of psychological safety climate. As the psychological safety climate increased, the negative relationship between professional identity and teacher burnout was mitigated. This finding suggests that psychological safety climate plays a pivotal role in determining the extent to which teachers' professional identity reduces their burnout levels. When teachers perceive a heightened psychological safety climate, the subtractive effect of their professional identity on burnout is enhanced. This implies that teachers who identify with their professional role may have lower levels of burnout if they perceive high levels of psychological safety in their work environment.

Practical Implications

The implications drawn from these findings hold crucial significance for educational institutions and administrators. They underscore the imperative to facilitate the cultivation of a robust professional identity among teachers, and to establish and sustain a psychologically safe climate within college and university settings. This objective can be achieved through the promotion of transparent communication, the cultivation of a culture embedded in trust and respect, and the provision of resources and support systems aimed at aiding teachers in effectively managing their workloads and coping with stress. Furthermore, tailoring resources and support to address the specific needs of female teachers could yield substantial benefits. This tailored support may encompass mentorship programs, opportunities for networking and professional development, and initiatives designed to address challenges connected with work-life balance.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

First, the cross-sectional design of our study precludes the establishment of causal inferences. Future research endeavors should adopt longitudinal methodologies to elucidate more definitively the causal relationships among the variables. Second, the study sample was limited to 193 Chinese teachers recruited through convenience sampling, thereby constraining the generalizability of the findings. Expanding the scope of research to encompass teachers from diverse cultural contexts would enhance the relevance and applicability of our conclusions. Last, while our study explored the combined impact of professional identity and psychological safety climate on burnout, further research could enhance comprehension of the mechanisms linking professional identity and burnout by integrating additional environmental and personal factors in subsequent studies.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the Education Department of Shaanxi Province Scientific Research Plan Project in 2022: "A Study on the Timeliness of Discourse on Ideological and Political Education in Private Colleges and

Universities of New Media” (Provincial Education Department No. 2022JK0150; Provincial Social Science Association No. 2022HZ1234), the Humanities and Social Sciences Planning Fund of the Ministry of Education (23YJA710020), and the 14th Five-Year Plan of Education Science of Liaoning Province (JG22DB079).

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

References

- Berkowitz, D., Ma, H., & Nishioka, S. (2017). Recasting the iron rice bowl: The reform of China’s state-owned enterprises. *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 99(4), 735–747. https://doi.org/10.1162/REST_a_00637
- Cai, Y. (2010). Global isomorphism and governance reform in Chinese higher education. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 16(3), 229–241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13583883.2010.497391>
- Edmondson, A. C., & Lei, Z. (2014). Psychological safety: The history, renaissance, and future of an interpersonal construct. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 1(1), 23–43. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-031413-091305>
- Fitzgerald, A. (2020). Professional identity: A concept analysis. *Nursing Forum*, 55(3), 447–472. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nuf.12450>
- Ghanizadeh, A., & Jahedizadeh, S. (2015). Teacher burnout: A review of sources and ramifications. *British Journal of Education, Society and Behavioural Science*, 6(1), 24–39. <https://doi.org/10.9734/BJESBS/2015/15162>
- Gómez-Jorge, F., & Díaz-Garrido, E. (2023). The relation between self-esteem and productivity: An analysis in higher education institutions. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, Article 1112437. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1112437>
- Hagermoser Sanetti, L. M., Boyle, A. M., Magrath, E., Cascio, A., & Moore, E. (2021). Intervening to decrease teacher stress: A review of current research and new directions. *Contemporary School Psychology*, 25(4), 416–425. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40688-020-00285-x>
- Johnson, C. E., Keating, J. L., & Molloy, E. K. (2020). Psychological safety in feedback: What does it look like and how can educators work with learners to foster it? *Medical Education*, 54(6), 559–570. <https://doi.org/10.1111/medu.14154>
- Lavy, S. (2022). A meaningful boost: Effects of teachers’ sense of meaning at work on their engagement, burnout, and stress. *AERA Open*, 8(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584221079857>
- Li, Y., & Yao, X. (2017). Attribution analysis of job burnout among female teachers in colleges and universities: A qualitative study based on NVivo 10 [In Chinese]. *Higher Education Exploration*, 12, 114–118. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1673-9760.2017.12.020>
- Lin, X. (2011). *An empirical study of the relationships among job burnout, exercise behavior, and perceived health condition for college teachers in Taiwan* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation) [In Chinese]. Huazhong University of Science and Technology. <https://doi.org/10.7666/d.d088135>
- Lin, Y., Ameyaw, M. A., Zhang, Q., Sun, B., & Li, W. (2022). The relationship between teacher professional identity and burnout amid the pandemic: A moderated mediation model. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 10, Article 956243. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2022.956243>
- Liu, H., Wu, L., & Dong, W. (2012). Why is academic research in China abundant but there is a lack of high-level achievements? [In Chinese]. *Studies in Science of Science*, 30(8), 1134–1142. <https://doi.org/10.16192/j.cnki.1003-2053.2012.08.003>
- Madigan, D. J., Kim, L. E., Glandorf, H. L., & Kavanagh, O. (2023). Teacher burnout and physical health: A systematic review. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 119, Article 102173. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2023.102173>

- Nixon, J. (1996). Professional identity and the restructuring of higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 21(1), 5–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079612331381417>
- Shao, Z., Feng, Y., & Wang, T. (2017). Charismatic leadership and tacit knowledge sharing in the context of enterprise systems learning: The mediating effect of psychological safety climate and intrinsic motivation. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, 36(2), 194–208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144929X.2016.1221461>
- Song, J., & Ji, Y. (2020). Complexity of Chinese family life. *China Review*, 20(2), 1–17. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26915619>
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (2004). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In J. T. Jost & J. Sidanius (Eds.), *Political psychology: Key readings* (pp. 276–293). Psychology Press. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203505984-16>
- Tian, X., & Jiang, S. (2022). Why anxious? A survey on career anxiety of young teachers in colleges and universities: Based on the background of the “up-or-not” policy [In Chinese]. *Higher Education Exploration*, 3, 39–44 + 87. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1673-9760.2022.03.007>
- Wang, T., Yu, L., Wang, W., & Dai, K. (2023). Employees in change: An exploration of academics’ perceived employee-organisation relationship in the reform of the tenure-track system in China. *Studies in Higher Education*, 2023, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2288940>
- Wang, X., & Wang, W. L. (2023). The tenure track employment system in colleges and universities in China: A scoping review of the Chinese literature. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, Article 1271110. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1271110>
- Xia, X., Huang, B., & Liu, C. (2022). Reforming the employment system of teachers in universities: Exploring the current situation and difficulties under the “up-or-out” policy. *Journal of Education Research*, 1(5), 343–347.
- Yang, X., Cai, X., & Cai, J. (2024). The effect of the tenure track on faculty member’s job insecurity and innovative work behavior. *Higher Education*, 88, 1927–1946. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-024-01194-1>
- Zhang, Y., Hawk, S. T., Zhang, X., & Zhao, H. (2016). Chinese preservice teachers’ professional identity links with education program performance: The roles of task value belief and learning motivations. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, Article 573. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00573>
- Zhang, Z. (2021). Current situation and problems of the reform of pre-employment long appointment system in “double first-class” universities: Analysis of teacher employment system in 42 double first-class universities [In Chinese]. *Journal of Higher Education Research Universities Press*, 44(4), 77–82. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1672-8874.2021.04.013>
- Zhao, J., Mustapha, S. M., & Wang, J. (2020). The impact of tertiary EFL teachers’ professional identity on job burnout in Hubei Province China. *Journal of Education and Social Sciences*, 15(2), 65–73. https://www.jesoc.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/JESOC15_058.pdf
- Zhou, H., & Chen, J. (2021). How does psychological empowerment prevent emotional exhaustion? psychological safety and organizational embeddedness as mediators. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, Article 546687. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.546687>
- Zhu, F. (2012). *Professional identity and organizational identity of Chinese university teachers* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation) [In Chinese]. Southwestern University of Finance and Economics.