



## From Commitment to Disengagement: How the Tenure-Track System Shapes Early-Career Faculty Teaching Engagement in China

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### Abstract

This study explores how the tenure-track system (TTS) influences the teaching engagement of early-career faculty in China's leading universities. Drawing on career development theory and role theory, it analyzes twelve interviews with early-career faculty through thematic analysis and temporal bracketing to identify a three-stage trajectory: initial commitment, strategic recalibration, and research-oriented disengagement. Findings show that role conflict, intensified by research-centred evaluation metrics and high-stakes student evaluations of teaching (SET), prompts a strategic shift from deep pedagogical work toward lower-variance teaching routines and perceived grading leniency to stabilise SET while protecting research time. Disengagement thus emerges as a calculated response to institutional incentives rather than a simple motivational decline. The study contributes to theoretical understandings of academic identity negotiation under performance-driven regimes and highlights the need for diversified, formative-oriented evaluation systems that value research and teaching contributions. Practical implications for tenure-track reforms in China and comparable higher education contexts are discussed.

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### Practitioner Notes

1. Tenure-track evaluation systems should diversify to recognize both research and undergraduate teaching contributions.
2. Student evaluations of teaching should be used formatively rather than as high-stakes determinants in tenure decisions.
3. Institutions must provide structured support for early-career faculty balancing research, teaching, and service roles.
4. Academic development programs should address role conflict and identity negotiation under performance-driven regimes.
5. Policy reforms should explicitly reward undergraduate supervision and mentorship activities in tenure-track frameworks.

### Keywords

Tenure-track system, early-career faculty, teaching, supervision

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## Introduction

The tenure-track system (TTS) grants tenure to faculty members who demonstrate excellence in research, teaching, and service within a specified evaluation period (Shu et al., 2020). As an institutional safeguard for academic freedom and faculty rights, the TTS originated in the United States and has been widely cited and emulated by universities globally to enhance faculty competitiveness (Li, 2024; Wang & Shi, 2021). Introduced at Tsinghua University in 1993 (Wang & Wang, 2023) and Peking University in 2003 (Shen, 2022), it has since been embraced by most "Project 985" and "Project 211" universities—elite universities that comprise less than 4% of all Chinese higher education institutions (Wang & Jones, 2021). As in other countries, Chinese universities generally follow a "tenure trifecta" of research, university service and student evaluations for TTS, despite the requirements for these positions varying among universities (Krebsbach, 2022; Wang & Li, 2021). Those who pass are promoted, while those who fail are dismissed. This system is also known as the "up or out" policy (Liu & Wang, 2020; Wang & Li, 2023). This operational logic can increase the strain on early-career faculty members, as they are required to perform in all three domains simultaneously.

International scholarship has thoroughly examined the impact of the TTS on faculty (Austin & Rice, 1998; Hemmings, 2012; Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006; Zubair et al., 2020). These studies find that early-career faculty prioritize research over teaching due to the disproportionate emphasis on research in tenure evaluations (Hott & Tietjen-Smith, 2018; Ren & Liu, 2021). This makes achieving a balance between research, teaching and service a persistent challenge (Itasanmi et al., 2022). However, existing literature focuses on career development trajectories and research productivity (Culha, 2024; Pietilä & Pinheiro, 2021; Zubair et al., 2020). In contrast, little is known about how teaching and supervisory roles evolve across the stages of the tenure track (Dawson et al., 2019; Hott & Tietjen-Smith, 2018). At the same time, there is limited empirical evidence on the institutional and individual factors that drive these shifts and their implications for the quality of undergraduate education (Gosling et al., 2020; Sultana & Jabeen, 2020).

In China, the role ambiguity among early-career faculty has been exacerbated by the practice of using publications from the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) and Science Citation Index (SCI) as required performance indicators (Si, 2022). This leads to teaching and service facing marginalisation as decisions regarding tenure place significant emphasis on quantifiable research achievements (Li & Shen, 2022; Li, 2024; Wang, 2022).

Unlike systems where national agencies establish external frameworks for assuring teaching quality, for example, the English case in which the Office for Students operates the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) as a national scheme assessing providers on indicators of teaching and student outcomes (Ashwin, 2022), the evaluation of tenure-track faculty in China is largely delegated to individual universities. These universities then place substantial weight on high-stakes student evaluations of teaching (SET), effectively transferring much of the judgement about teaching quality to students and narrowing the evidence base for recognising teaching excellence (Wang, 2020; Wu & Wei, 2025; Yu, 2021; Zhao et al., 2021).

The use of SET to assess teaching quality across many institutions further marginalises teaching. This occurs because, despite its original intention for formative feedback (Ahmad & Olule, 2022),

the heavy weighting of SET encourages lenient grading due to grade-related bias, which weakens its validity (Al Ahmad et al., 2025; Dana et al., 2023). By contrast, research outputs map cleanly onto promotion benchmarks, whereas SET is a noisy and unpredictable proxy for teaching quality (Culha, 2024; Georgakakis et al., 2022; Gosling et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2023). Under these conditions, teaching engagement, understood as faculty commitment to and involvement in teaching roles (Fernandez, 2021), is rationally displaced. This leads to consequences such as grade inflation, superficial learning and weaker undergraduate supervision (Chen & Fan, 2022; Wang & Li, 2021).

While Dawson et al. (2019) compare teaching loads before and after tenure, their cross-sectional design may not be suited to capturing the dynamic, nonlinear shifts occurring during the probationary phase. This study seeks to address this gap through a process-oriented, temporally ordered analysis of faculty engagement trajectories. Although role strain under the TTS is well-documented (Hemmings, 2012), limited research has examined how Chinese faculty strategically negotiate teaching commitments within SCI/SSCI-driven evaluation regimes or the consequences of these negotiations for undergraduate education (Wang & Jones, 2021).

To guide the analysis, this study adopts a combined theoretical and methodological approach, employing thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022) as the primary analytical strategy and ordering narratives by tenure milestones following temporal bracketing (Langley, 1999) to reconstruct change over time. Career development theory explains when and why early-career faculty shift priorities as institutional expectations change, whereas role theory explains how competing demands across research, teaching, and service generate role strain that—when incentives privilege research—erodes teaching engagement (Hott & Tietjen-Smith, 2018). Integrating these lenses, this study conceptualize role negotiation as a dynamic process of identity work shaped jointly by institutional incentives and individual career aims along the tenure-track timeline. Drawing on in-depth semi-structured interviews with twelve early-career faculty ( $\leq 6$  years post-PhD) at three leading Chinese universities, the study addresses how these mechanisms reconfigure teaching engagement over time. The specific research questions are as follows:

1. How do early-career faculty describe and rationalize their teaching engagement under the TTS pressures?
2. How do tenure-track institutional structures influence early-career faculty's teaching engagement decisions?
3. How do early-career faculty perceive the influence of their teaching engagement shifts on undergraduate learning experiences?

By mapping how institutional evaluation criteria reshape faculty teaching engagement over time, this study offers empirical and policy insights for recalibrating the TTS in China—particularly by diversifying performance metrics and reinforcing formative teaching assessments. It further contributes to theoretical debates on academic identity formation and role conflict within performance-driven higher education systems.

# Literature

## Tenure-Track System in China

The Chinese adaptation of the TTS demonstrates both convergence with international academic standards and divergence based on domestic institutional reforms (Si, 2022; Zu, 2021). While formally aligned with Western expectations across research, teaching, and service (Greene et al., 2008; Hemmings, 2012; Khan et al., 2023), tenure evaluations in China place a disproportionate emphasis on research outputs—particularly the quantity of Web of Science-indexed publications (Shu et al., 2020). This approach has raised Chinese universities' profile abroad (Liu et al., 2021), but it has also intensified pressure on early-career faculty to put research ahead of teaching (Culha, 2024; Gosling et al., 2020; Pietilä & Pinheiro, 2021; Zhang, 2021). Although many universities claim to be dedicated to teaching excellence, this commitment is often merely symbolic (Geng & Lou, 2022; Liu, 2022). In practice, tenure decisions heavily favor research productivity, creating what Li and Shen (2022) describe as a "performative culture." In this context, faculty members can display pedagogical commitment while strategically focusing on publication-driven outputs. This institutional inconsistency places additional strain on faculty roles, compelling a strategic reallocation of effort away from meaningful engagement in teaching.

## Theoretical Framework

This study integrates career development theory (Brown & Lent, 2012; Super, 1980) and role theory (Hemmings, 2012; Kerr, 1978). According to career development theory, professional growth is a lifelong process in which individuals realize their self-concept through successive stages, shaped by changing priorities and workplace pressures (Brown & Lent, 2012; Pasha & Reza Abedi, 2020; Super, 1980). Super's life-space theory further emphasizes that career trajectories are influenced by the concurrent performance of multiple social roles, such as student, worker, and caregiver (Kot et al., 2020). This focus on the role multiplicity conceptually links career development theory with the role theory lens (Gonçalves et al., 2023; Kerr, 1978).

Role theory is based on three key concepts: role behaviors (patterned and characteristic social actions), role identities (the parts or identities assumed by social participants), and role expectations (the scripts or norms that guide behavior) (Biddle, 1986). When expectations are unclear or incompatible, actors experience ambiguity, conflict, or overload (Hemmings, 2012; Kerr, 1978; Su et al., 2023). To cope, they reallocate attention among roles through strategies such as prioritization, boundary buffering, or minimal compliance (Ashforth et al., 2000; Siegall & Cummings, 1995). Taken together, research-centric incentives and high-stakes evaluation practices are posited to generate role conflict that prompts time reallocation and selective disengagement from pedagogical development.

In the Chinese TTS context, research-centered incentives and high-stakes SET operate as mechanisms that heighten role conflict and prompt strategic effort shifts across research–teaching–service. In short, career development theory helps explain when and why priorities shift across early-career stages, whereas role theory explains how institutional expectations are

translated into patterned behavior under competing demands. Applied to academic work, the professional role spans research, teaching, and service (Itasanmi et al., 2022). During the establishment stage, early-career academics frequently seek identity consolidation and competence to obtain tenure (Wang et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2023). In academia, the tripartite demands of research–teaching–service frequently collide, generating role strain when success in one domain raises the cost of another (Ayub et al., 2022; Hegyi-Halmos, 2023). Consequently, many early-career faculty report protecting research time and shifting teaching toward low-risk compliance (Alfred et al., 2021; Pasha & Reza Abedi, 2020). This study, therefore, treats "disengagement" as a form of instrumental agency—an adaptive allocation strategy—rather than a simple motivational decline.

## **Empirical Research on Tenure-Track System and Faculty Engagement**

The impact of the TTS on faculty teaching engagement in international contexts has been the subject of an expanding corpus of empirical research (Keng, 2018; Wang, 2022; Zubair, 2020). While the TTS has improved research outputs and encouraged academic creativity globally (Sultana & Jabeen, 2020), it has also solidified a "publish-or-perish" mentality, frequently ignoring teaching and service obligations (Wang, 2022). In China, the research imperative tends to take precedence over mentoring and undergraduate instruction (Li, 2024). Under research pressures, early-career faculty prioritize research while deprioritizing undergraduate teaching and supervision (McCormick & Willcox, 2020; Si, 2022; Wang, 2022; X. Wang & Wang, 2023). These shifts negatively impact students' learning outcomes, thereby reducing the quality of education (Boyer, 1990; Guillaume & Apodaca, 2022; Oliveira et al., 2024). In response, scholarship increasingly advocates for mixed-methods assessments that acknowledge both research productivity and teaching efficacy (Anzivino & Vaira, 2024). Consequently, recent reforms often emphasize balanced criteria, robust mentoring programs, and comprehensive academic development initiatives (Broström et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2023; Wada & Madu, 2024). Institutions that adopt more holistic evaluation frameworks report improvements in faculty job satisfaction, instructional quality, and research outputs (Bichsel, 2024). However, the evidence from China is limited.

## **Identified Research Gaps**

Although the effects of the TTS have been extensively studied, few process-oriented qualitative studies are currently available. How Chinese faculty members manage to balance teaching and research at different stages of their careers has not received much research attention. Existing studies such as those by Pietilä & Pinheiro (2021) quantify the trade-offs between teaching and research but often fail to delve into the subjective justifications faculty provide for these decisions. Moreover, the prevalent methodological reliance on surveys, as seen in works by Khan et al. (2023), tends to obscure the lived experiences of role conflict among faculty members. Additionally, policy recommendations that advocate for the adoption of Western mixed-methods evaluations in China frequently overlook the deeply entrenched path dependencies associated with SCI/SSCI frameworks, a critical oversight highlighted by Zhang (2023).

This study addresses these gaps by reconstructing stage-specific trajectories of teaching engagement and examining how early-career faculty members interpret their experiences under the TTS pressures using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022) with temporal bracketing (Langley, 1999). By emphasizing lived experiences, it offers new insights into how faculty engagement paths are influenced by the intersection of institutional expectations, policy contexts, and individual career goals. According to Leibowitz (2014), academic development strategies need to be adjusted to the changing educational landscape because there is no one-size-fits-all approach. This qualitative approach adds a critical viewpoint to current discussions on maintaining faculty teaching engagement in the face of growing performance demands in Chinese higher education, and it supports existing quantitative findings (Shin, 2011; Shin et al., 2014).

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative design grounded in an interpretivist stance, which views reality as socially constructed and accessed through participants' meanings (Ma & Ma, 2022; Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). To trace how TTS influences early-career faculty's teaching engagement over time, this study uses thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022) with temporal bracketing (Langley, 1999). Thematic analysis is employed to identify and report patterned meanings in the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022), while temporal bracketing is used to partition process data into successive phases to trace how actions in one period reconfigure the context shaping subsequent actions (Langley, 1999). Given the use of double-coding, this study positions the analysis as a codebook-oriented thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2022); this choice aims to stabilize cross-case comparability and the phase model.

### **Sampling and Participants**

Participants were early-career faculty members in Chinese universities who had earned a PhD within the past six years and were on the tenure-track. To represent diversity, participants were selected from three tiers of Chinese higher education institutions: Double First-Class universities, Project 211 universities, and Project 985 universities. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling techniques until thematic sufficiency was attained (Mack et al., 2002; Robinson, 2016). At the tenth interview, the lack of new substantive subthemes in the two prior interviews signaled saturation (Francis et al., 2010). Recruitment then continued for verification, and the final sample comprised twelve faculty members. Participants varied in academic disciplines, rank, gender, and institutional affiliation; however, all participants were from social science disciplines—thus, disciplinary variation occurred within the social sciences. Each was assigned an anonymized alphanumeric ID reflecting their background (e.g., "985-MG-AP-F3" indicates a female Assistant Professor in Management at a Project 985 university, with three years of service). Table 1 summarizes participant demographics.

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Interviews were conducted in private settings to

promote openness, and data were securely stored on encrypted drives accessible only to the research team.

**Table 1**

*Demographics of the Respondents*

ID	University	Discipline	Rank	Gender	Service (yrs)	Age (yrs)
985-MG-AP-M3	Project 985	Management	Assistant Professor	Male	3	31
985-MG-AS-M6	Project 985	Management	Associate Professor	Male	6	38
985-ED-AP-F1	Project 985	Education	Assistant Professor	Female	1	29
985-SO-AS-F5	Project 985	Sociology	Associate Professor	Female	5	34
211-ED-AP-M3	Project 211	Education	Assistant Professor	Male	3	32
211-SO-AP-M4	Project 211	Sociology	Assistant Professor	Male	4	33
211-MG-AP-M2	Project 211	Management	Assistant Professor	Male	2	31
211-MG-AS-F5	Project 211	Management	Associate Professor	Female	5	34
DFC-ED-AP-F1	Double First-Class	Education	Assistant Professor	Female	1	29
DFC-ED-AP-F5	Double First-Class	Education	Assistant Professor	Female	5	34
DFC-SO-AP-F2	Double First-Class	Sociology	Assistant Professor	Female	2	30
DFC-MG-AS-M4	Double First-Class	Management	Associate Professor	Male	4	33

**Note.** *The highest institutional designation was used for classification in this study. Project 985 universities are also classified as 211 after policy evolution, and many Project 211, but not all, are included in the Double First-Class universities.*

## Research Instrument

A semi-structured interview guide was designed to explore participants' perceptions and experiences regarding professional development within the "publish or perish" culture (Tian et al., 2016). The guide included open-ended questions covering teaching engagement, research pressures, service obligations, and personal coping strategies. Examples of prompts include: "How have tenure expectations influenced the time and energy you allocate to teaching?" and "Can you describe any moments when you felt conflicted between research and teaching

responsibilities?” Two pilot interviews were conducted, leading to minor refinements in question wording and sequence; pilot data were excluded from the final analysis.

## **Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via private WeChat sessions. The flexible format enabled real-time clarification and deeper probing of issues as they arose, facilitating thorough examination of key themes (Saha & Kiran, 2022). All formal interviews were conducted in Mandarin between November and December 2024 and lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. With the participants' permission, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in Mandarin. These transcripts were then translated into English and anonymized before analysis. A second researcher cross-checked all translations, and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Key quotations were also cross-checked against the original Chinese text using a shared glossary to ensure that domain-specific terms were preserved.

## **Data analysis**

The data analysis was an iterative process that rigorously followed the six-phase thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Temporal bracketing (Langley, 1999) was applied to structure each participant's narrative by organizing accounts around tenure milestones. Specifically, Phase 1 (Years 0–1) covered entry and the first annual review, during which expectations and evaluation criteria were initially established. Phase 2 (Years 2–3) coincided with the high-stakes mid-term review, during which performance pressures intensified and coping strategies diversified. Phase 3 (Years 4–6) covered the period after the mid-term review, leading up to decisions regarding tenure or promotion, when retaining staff in the long term became the dominant objective. Although reviews occur annually, these three milestones best capture changes in incentive structures and risk perception. The analysis focused on individual trajectories rather than institutional comparisons.

The six steps (see Figure 1) of thematic analysis with a temporal bracketing strategy included:

1. Familiarization with the data. Twelve participants provided detailed accounts suitable for rich within-sample comparison. Two researchers read and re-read transcripts with analytic memos on emotions, conflicts, and adaptations.
2. Generating initial codes. All transcripts were coded in NVivo 12 using English translations verified against originals. About 30% were double-coded; differences were reconciled to update a shared codebook rather than to compute reliability coefficients, and decisions were documented. Illustrative code–theme mappings appear in Table 2.
3. Searching for themes (within brackets). The analysis was organized into three temporal brackets anchored in key milestones of China's TTS. Within each temporal bracket, initial codes were clustered inductively into mechanism-based subthemes—for example, shifting risk perception, reallocation of time, and recalibration of teaching strategies. Cross-checking within



and across brackets included explicit searches for disconfirming/negative cases and allowed identification of both stage-specific patterns and cumulative adaptations over time.

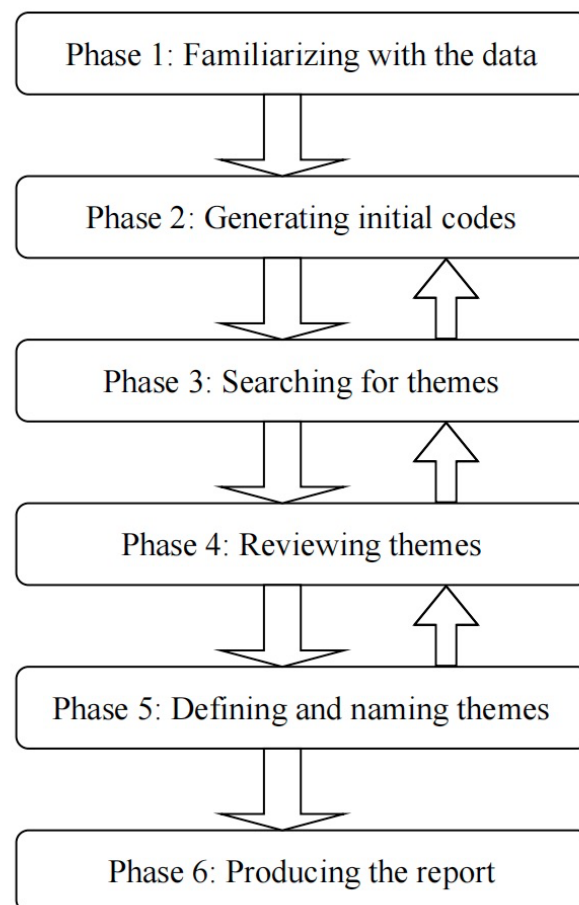
4. Reviewing themes (within & across brackets). Themes were checked within and across brackets, with active negative-case searches.

5. Defining and naming themes (process model). Themes were refined and named, yielding a phased trajectory described as "idealistic commitment, followed by strategic recalibration, and culminating in research-oriented disengagement." For participants whose institutional milestones deviated from the 0–1/2–3/4–6 structure, alternative anchors (e.g., probation extensions or early promotion attempts) were used to preserve temporal comparability.

6. Writing up the findings. Findings are presented by phase, using representative quotations to illustrate how early actions shaped later contexts.

### Figure 1

*Thematic analysis: Six interactive phases*



**Note.** Adapted from Labra et al. (2020).

**Table 2***Example of the Coding Process (Thematic Analysis + Temporal Bracketing)*

Raw Data Excerpt	Initial Code	Subtheme	Overarching Theme / Phase
"I take teaching very seriously and spend a lot of time preparing classes and guiding students." (985-ED-AP-F1)	Teaching dedication; Moral duty in teaching	Professional aspiration; Teaching as moral identity	Phase 1 – Idealistic Commitment
"Guiding undergraduate research projects is not as cost-effective as writing papers or submitting proposals." (211-ED-AP-M3)	Input–output rationalization; Teaching–research allocation trade-off	Strategic prioritization; Role conflict	Phase 2 – Strategic Recalibration
"My chances of getting promoted were impacted by my lower SET score due to strict standards. Therefore, I need to reduce my teaching investment." (985-MG-AP-M3)	Grade bias; Performance evaluation pressure	Instrumental adaptation; Coping strategy	Phase 2 – Strategic Recalibration
"Research must be prioritized over undergraduate mentoring in order to obtain tenure." (985-SO-AS-F5)	Research dominance; Teaching disengagement	Institutionalized survival strategies	Phase 3 – Research-Oriented Disengagement
"Improved instruction cuts down on research time and hurts chances of advancement." (DFC-ED-AP-F5)	Paradox of incentives; Institutional contradiction	Structural constraints; Role strain	Phase 3 – Research-Oriented Disengagement

## Results

This section reports the main findings within the framework of thematic analysis and temporal bracketing, organized around the research questions. The analysis suggests that an orientation toward publication-weighted benchmarks and SET prompts early-career faculty to shift from an idealistic commitment to a strategic recalibration and, ultimately, to a research-oriented disengagement. This yields three consequences: (1) a downward shift in instructional difficulty and a lowering of the standards applied to student assessment; (2) reductions in mentoring and interactive activities; and (3) diminished depth and stability in student learning.

### Phase 1 (Year 0–1): Idealistic Commitment — Moral Aspiration and Professional Identity

Before their first annual review, 11 out of 12 participants indicated high intrinsic motivation for undergraduate teaching. They were usually motivated by moral aspirations and their professional identity as educators. For instance, 985-ED-AP-F1 estimated that she supervised students and prepared lessons for over twenty hours each week. She believed that teaching not only "affects students" but is also "one of the assessment criteria for the TTS." Similarly, DFC-ED-AP-F1, who

provided students with active mentoring for the "Challenge Cup" competition, remarked: "In addition to classroom teaching, I also spend time guiding students' research, because guiding students' research is also a teaching task", and she thought that is "central to my academic identity."

This idealistic starting point was widespread, even among those who later changed their approach. For example, 211-ED-AP, 985-MG-AS-M6 and 985-MG-AP-M3 reported devoting "substantial time to lesson design" and "setting high standards for students" in the first year. 985-MG-AP-M3 stated that the period could be described as "naïve professionalism", reflecting his belief that earnest teaching would not only benefit students but also better satisfy the TTS evaluation criteria. DFC-MG-AS-M4 was an exception. He reviewed the TTS before joining. After taking up the post, he maintained a "zero-error baseline" in teaching and put research first.

Although most participants were fully committed to teaching at this stage, a few more astute individuals had already identified a discrepancy between the stated evaluation criteria and the day-to-day incentives. DFC-ED-AP-F1 thoroughly examined the evaluation documents after joining and found that, although teaching was included in the TTS criteria, the returns were lower than those of SSCI-indexed publications. 211-SO-AP-M4 noticed that senior colleagues gave publication precedence over lesson planning during his first year. This led him to question whether teaching and research were comparable pursuits. These early findings made people wonder if a strong commitment to teaching would be acknowledged.

## **Phase 2 (Year 2–3): Strategic Recalibration — Role Conflict and Instrumental Adaptation**

Participants were prompted to reevaluate their teaching priorities after the first annual review became apparent as a pivotal moment. While universities portrayed teaching, research, and service as coequal, respondents reported that teaching was largely mediated through SET, research was judged mainly by SSCI-indexed publications and grants, and service remained peripheral. Regarding stage distribution, 4 of 12 participants remained in Phase 2, and 6 of 12 had passed the mid-term review and entered the subsequent contract cycle (although now beyond Phase 2, they retrospectively described having gone through it). 8 of 10 indicated a recalibration of teaching motivation and strategy toward a risk-avoidant, research-protective orientation.

After their first annual evaluations and as mid-term reviews approached, participants reassessed the cost-benefit of teaching. 985-MG-AP-M3, despite a teaching award, reported "Some students gave me low SET scores, perhaps because I was too strict." He expressed an intention to approach by adopting "lenient standards" and "simpler exams" for students. 211-MG-AP-M2 added that "SET is subjective," and "faculty have limited recourse to challenge or appeal SET results." In his first year, his overall evaluation was not particularly strong, in part because he prioritized teaching, yet the SET outcome was dragged down by two extremely low student ratings. To mitigate this "career risk" and secure research time amid mid-term pressure, he considered adopting a strategy of "limiting content depth" and "setting easier exams." 211-ED-AP-M3 concluded that "undergraduate research supervision was less cost-effective than publishing articles in SSCI-indexed journals and securing research grants" and planned not to "invest so

much time and effort in guiding undergraduate." DFC-SO-AP-F2 framed these moves as "risk avoidance": "completing tasks quickly and keeping students satisfied to protect SET while reallocating time to research."

Participants who had already passed the mid-term review used the same logic. The mix of subjective SET scores and publication-based targets kept the pressure high. 211-SO-AP-M4 "At the time, I was on the verge of failing the mid-term review because one article was still pending; thankfully, I later received the acceptance notice." He added that "Despite institutional rhetoric, actual evaluations prioritize research." 985-MG-AS-M6 reported that as the midterm review approached, he was overwhelmed by manuscript deadlines; nevertheless, he did not relax his high standards for students. A student with otherwise strong grades approached him and stated directly: "I hope you can give me a higher grade point average (GPA) because I want to apply to overseas programs; I will also give you higher scores on the SET." Which led him to second-guess strict grading. Entering the post and consistently adhering to his self-imposed "no-error baseline" in teaching, DFC-MG-AS-M4 prioritized preparation for a national-level grant and, in keeping with that principle, slowed updates to course materials, reusing "slides from the previous two years due to time constraints."

Overall, participants felt that the combination of SET and publication targets led to risk-averse teaching practices, such as simplifying exams, relaxing grading and reducing undergraduate supervision, to stabilise ratings and protect research time. Several participants also felt that there were few procedural safeguards when strict grading led to low SET scores, which heightened the perceived risk of investing heavily in teaching. Their attitude towards teaching engagement is a pragmatic approach to risk management. A counterexample was DFC-ED-AP-F5, who reported consistently conscientious teaching with high SET; while acknowledging the primacy of research in evaluations, she said she maintained rigorous standards "on professional-ethics grounds."

### **Phase 3 (Year 4–6): Research-Oriented Disengagement — Survival Strategy under Evaluation Regime**

After the mid-term review, six participants reported a period in which promotion decisions were perceived to hinge primarily on publications, with stable SET scores as a secondary requirement and service remained peripheral. Participants increasingly framed teaching as an obligation to be handled with minimal variance, and disengagement was described as a practical survival strategy. 985-MG-AS-M6 had just obtained tenure, he noted that dismissals after the mid-term review changed his calculus: "I can no longer justify the previous level of investment in teaching. I am inclined to be more lenient in grading, since securing promotion to Associate Professor is essential for my longer-term prospects. Having barely met the mid-term benchmark and later obtained tenure in her fourth year, 985-SO-AS-F5 observed that service rarely differentiates faculty, teaching differentiates modestly, and research differentiates strongly. She remarked, "To secure tenure quickly, research must take precedence over undergraduate mentoring and service." She added: "In practice, SET scores matter more than 'teaching quality' per se. Students can appeal grades, but we cannot appeal evaluation outcomes; being more lenient in grading tends to make things smoother."

Entering with a research-first rule and keeping to it through to tenure in year four, DFC-MG-AS-M4 consistently adhered to his self-imposed "no-error baseline" in teaching, prioritized manuscripts and grants. He criticized SET's short-term logic, saying that it "privileges immediate student satisfaction over long-term academic benefits." Entering her fifth year, DFC-ED-AP-F5 noted that, despite early awareness of research priorities, she had maintained substantial teaching engagement; seeing her publication record lagging behind colleagues, she planned to refocus on articles and grants. Participants further reported that by years 4 to 6, risk-minimizing routines were more common, including lowering course difficulty, relaxing classroom management, and reducing undergraduate supervision, to protect SET and secure research time. As 211-SO-AP-M4 summarized: "Publishing is what matters." 211-MG-AS-F5 added that the spread of such less rigorous courses was aided by reduced dedication among some early-career faculty, who lowered difficulty and relaxed classroom management.

Participants generally felt that linking SET and publication counts to promotion encourages a defensive approach to teaching and reduces the time available for teaching in favor of research. They described this as a gradual shift rather than a sudden change. In this context, "disengagement" refers to stepping back from intensive teaching activities, such as close mentoring or experimenting with new pedagogical approaches, in favour of low-risk, compliance-oriented work that meets minimum requirements.

## **Discussion**

### **Discussion of Key Findings**

During Phase 1 (Years 0–1), participants were generally idealistic and tried to match personal values with institutional rhetoric, consistent with the establishment stage in career development theory (Super, 1980; Brown & Lent, 2012). As the mid-term review (Years 2–3) drew near, that idealism was reconsidered and the stakes attached to SET and publication milestones grew. Some participants reported simplifying student evaluations, loosening the criteria for student assessments and spending more time on research during this stage. According to role theory, these behaviors demonstrate a practical and strategic approach to risk management, and are a reasonable response to role conflicts arising from competing demands (Kerr, 1978; Hemmings, 2012). This approach aligns with research indicating that reward systems can redirect academic focus and with career development theory's explanation of shifting priorities at different life stages (Gosling et al., 2020; Hemmings, 2012; Super, 1980). In the years leading up to tenure (Years 4–6), most participants focused on research and tried to teach without making mistakes. This defensive, minimalist approach was reinforced during the career development maintenance phase (Brown & Lent, 2012; Hemmings, 2012; Kerr, 1978; Super, 1980).

The "SCI/SSCI imperative" and the high-stakes application of SET both influence early-career faculty members' teaching engagement (Ahmad & Olule, 2022; Si, 2022; Wang, 2022). The imperative to publish in SCI/SSCI journals makes research the decisive route to tenure, creating a clear return differential that shifts time away from pedagogy. This is consistent with global evidence on the effects of "publish or perish" pressures (Gosling et al., 2020; Zubair et al., 2020), and this effect is amplified by performance-driven governance (Li & Shen, 2022; Si, 2022; Wang, 2022). Consistent with previous studies (Ahmad & Olule, 2022; Al Ahmad et al., 2025; Dana et

al., 2023), although SET was designed to promote progress, it is applied summatively and encourages teachers to adopt more lenient and simplified exams due to grade-related bias. These factors influence how early-career faculty members teach when considered together: the high-stakes subjectivity of SET promotes lower instructional standards, while time-bound publication requirements force faculty to prioritize research over pedagogy. This is not a voluntary abandonment of teaching, but rather a strategic limitation of teaching investment to manage evaluation risk and meet research expectations when time and resources are limited.

Moral ambivalence and ethical discomfort are commonly perceived outcomes when faculty members deal with misaligned incentives. Participants exhibit identity bifurcation to satisfy evaluation criteria, maintaining an idealized self as an "educator" while also acting as a "risk manager." This results in perfunctory teaching that meets the minimum standards, involving low-variance practices. It is a coping strategy induced by the structure of the system, rather than a sign of moral erosion (Gao et al., 2020; Tian & Li, 2020). Participants interpret the experience as a signal to limit rather than enhance pedagogical engagement, reflecting a constant disconnect between institutional rhetoric of teaching excellence and operational reward structures that prioritize quantifiable research outputs (Li & Shen, 2022). To put it briefly, disengagement is seen as a systemic reaction to incentive design rather than an individual failure.

### **Theoretical and Practical Implications**

By combining role theory and career development, this study advances theory by rethinking faculty members' adaptation as a dynamic process of identity negotiation under performance governance. First, it advances the theory of career development by demonstrating that the stages of an academic career are impacted not only by chronology but also by evolving assessment techniques. Second, it enhances role theory by presenting the idea of instrumental disengagement, in which instructors deliberately curtail their instruction in order to control evaluative risk as opposed to passively retreating. These observations combine to produce a three-phase, process-oriented model that explains how institutional logics convert into coping mechanisms when demands clash (role theory) and when and why priorities change in the early phases of a career (career development theory).

To counter incentive misalignment in China's TTS, reforms should focus on rebalancing the way teaching is evaluated and rewarded. First, the weight of SET should be reduced, and a third-party evaluation mechanism should be introduced to provide external moderation and quality assurance. Comparable to national quality assurance systems elsewhere, for example in Ecuador, the Council for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CACES) serves this function by evaluating and accrediting universities and programmes at the national level (Guerrero-Quíñonez et al., 2023). Second, to counterbalance the predominance of research, the TTS criteria should specifically recognize undergraduate mentoring and pedagogical innovation. Third, infrastructure to support teaching should be created, such as tenure pathways focused on teaching, long-term mentoring and ongoing feedback cycles instead of one-time evaluations. This helps keep values and motivation aligned. Without such changes, defensive, routine teaching may become entrenched and weaken educational aims. The recommendations are also applicable to academic systems around the world, including in Finland, Japan, the Netherlands, South Korea and

Pakistan. In these countries, TTS also influence teaching priorities, promotion standards and academic behaviour.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This study has several limitations that restrict the interpretation and generalizability of its findings. The small, purposive sample ( $n = 12$ ) was concentrated in social science disciplines and elite institutions, which limits variation across fields and tiers. Therefore, the results should be understood as analytical generalizations rather than population estimates. The retrospective self-report design is vulnerable to recall and social desirability bias, and the perceived effects on undergraduate learning were not triangulated with classroom observations or student-level evidence. Furthermore, the translation from Mandarin to English and the use of a codebook-oriented thematic approach may introduce interpretative discrepancies despite double-coding and cross-checks. Finally, the processual design is not intended for causal attribution or effect-size estimation.

Future research should adopt mixed-methods, multi-site designs combining longitudinal interviews with classroom observations and student outcomes (e.g. assessment artifacts, grade distributions and SET subscales) to strengthen triangulation. Comparative studies across disciplines and institution types, including teaching-oriented universities, are needed to test the conditions under which the proposed three-phase model applies. Where feasible, scholars could leverage policy changes as quasi- or natural experiments and link administrative datasets to estimate the impact of shifts in evaluation regimes on teaching practice and student learning. Evaluations of specific interventions, such as peer review with calibrated rubrics, teaching portfolios, mentoring schemes and teaching-focused tenure tracks, would further clarify which reforms sustain authentic teaching engagement. In addition, comparative studies across national contexts would further clarify how cultural, political, and institutional arrangements mediate the negotiation of teaching and research roles.

### **Conclusion**

Participants experienced three progressive phases: idealistic commitment (Years 0–1), strategic recalibration (Years 2–3) and research-oriented disengagement (Years 4–6). This study investigates the shift in early-career faculty in China's TTS from values-driven engagement to risk-managed participation. Participants attributed this shift to the combined importance of publication benchmarks and the significant use of SET. In response, many adopted low-variance teaching routines, such as simpler assessments, more lenient grading and reduced undergraduate supervision, to stabilize evaluations and protect research time. However, a minority maintained rigorous standards on ethical grounds. Integrating career development and role theory, the findings conceptualize disengagement as phased and strategic rather than a simple loss of motivation, and point to a form of strategic role withdrawal under incentive misalignment. Policy-wise, the evidence supports using SET primarily as formative input and diversifying summative evidence (peer review with rubrics, teaching portfolios, calibrated observations), alongside explicit recognition of mentoring and pedagogical innovation. Piloting teaching-focused tenure pathways may further reduce misalignment. The study's inferences are bounded by a purposive sample ( $n=12$ ) and retrospective self-reports; perceptions of impact on

student learning were not triangulated with student data or observations. Future work should pair longitudinal qualitative accounts with multi-institution surveys and student perspectives, and compare trajectories across tenure systems to clarify how institutional designs condition faculty teaching engagement over time.

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