

## Original article

# Navigating uncertainty: The psychological strain on borderline candidates in the postgraduate recommendation system

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### Abstract:

Amid intensifying competition for postgraduate admission in the mainland of China, an increasing number of students are pursuing the recommendation pathway (*Baoyan*) as an alternative to the national entrance examination. However, intense competition within this system has produced unanticipated consequences, particularly for borderline candidates whose academic performance falls near the eligibility threshold. Despite pervasive anxiety and uncertainty, many persist in the competition, underscoring the need for closer scholarly attention to their experiences. This study applies Merton's theory of unanticipated consequences to explore the psychological and social impacts of the recommendation system on borderline candidates. Using a qualitative case study approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight borderline candidates from Double First-Class universities, selected for their higher recommendation quotas and intense internal competition. Borderline status was defined as students whose academic rankings fell within 20 percent above or below the institutional recommendation threshold. Thematic analysis of interview data examined effects on academic performance, psychological well-being, and interpersonal relationships. Findings revealed: (1) persistent uncertainty caused anxiety, insomnia, and emotional stress; (2) the system's merit-based evaluations pushed candidates to overextend in research, competitions, and extracurriculars, leading to burnout and a utilitarian approach to learning; (3) peer relationships blended rivalry and support, with trust erosion alongside increased empathy; (4) coping strategies included self-adaptation, seeking support, and avoidance. Through Merton's lens, the study highlights how institutional design, individual motivation, and campus culture intersect to produce unanticipated outcomes. The study calls on universities to refine recommendation criteria, strengthen psychological support, and cultivate collaborative campus environments to mitigate structural pressures and foster students' holistic development.

## 1. Introduction

The Postgraduate Recommendation (*Baoyan*) System is an important mechanism for postgraduate admission in the mainland of China, in which outstanding final-year undergraduate students are directly eligible for enrolment in master's programs without undergoing entrance examinations. This system was initially designed to attract outstanding undergraduate graduates to pursue postgraduate studies and to serve as another way to reward overall outstanding performance. Yet the system has also produced a range of unintended problems

that fall most heavily on borderline candidates (Zhang & Huang, 2022). Sitting near the eligibility threshold, these candidates face not only intense competition but also sustained uncertainty, which together generate adverse academic, psychological, and social outcomes (Li et al., 2007).

Despite *Baoyan's* pivotal role in shaping students' academic trajectories, scholarly attention to its unanticipated consequences for borderline candidates remains limited. Current research has focused on broader systemic dimensions of the *Baoyan* process and the comparison between *Baoyan* and other admission pathways (Guo et al., 2015; Niu et al., 2019;

Zhuang & Liu, 2025), but few studies delve into the specific experiences of students who struggle near the threshold of *Baoyan* eligibility. The present study, therefore, investigates the unanticipated impacts of the *Baoyan* system on borderline candidates, drawing on their lived experiences to inform institutional policy reform and the development of student support mechanisms.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Massification, credential inflation, and structural pressures

From the end of the twentieth century to recent years, annual enrolment in higher education in the mainland of China has expanded dramatically, raising the gross enrolment ratio from a low baseline to a level that now exceeds 60 per cent of the age cohort (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2024). Initially, policymakers viewed massification as a means to expand participation and fuel a knowledge economy (Chen, 2012). However, the rapid expansion also devalued the bachelor's degree as a labour-market signal (Araki & Kariya, 2022). As a result, employers raised educational standards, and postgraduate qualifications became a new positional good, intensifying competition for academic qualifications (Jung, 2023; Mok et al., 2016; Tomlinson & Watermeyer, 2022). Moreover, graduate employment data from the Employment Report of Chinese College Students indicated that, in 2021, master's graduates started with a noticeably higher salary than bachelor's graduates (Yue et al., 2023), meaning that postgraduate qualifications can lead to significantly higher income levels. Brown & Tannock (2009) critique this trend as a form of opportunity hoarding that ultimately reproduces social stratification. Marginson (2016) argue it intensifies academic competition in ways that reshape student identity.

Due to the devaluation of bachelor's degrees, postgraduate studies, especially master's degrees, have become increasingly important for students from the Chinese mainland (Zhai & Cao, 2025). Unlike the admission methods for master's programs in US (Li & Cohen, 2024; Sanders & Landrum, 2012), which typically require standardized tests alongside other supporting documents, or the more streamlined procedures adopted in UK and Hong Kong S.A.R (Cheung et al., 2019; Fiekers et al., 2000; Jung, 2020), which rely less on standardized testing, the Chinese mainland offers only two mainstream routes for undergraduates to enter master's programs: taking the *Nationwide Master's Program Unified Admission Examination*, or being recommended as outstanding undergraduate to study for a master's degree. Therefore, the mechanism for preparing for postgraduate admissions in the mainland of China differs significantly from other education systems. Meanwhile, unlike many education systems that offer taught master's degrees, master's degrees in the mainland of China are mostly research-based. Overall, the master's admissions process in the mainland of China is characterised by longer preparation periods, higher demands for specialised knowledge, and an intensely competitive landscape.

The *Baoyan* system was initially established to encourage

incoming undergraduate graduates to apply for postgraduate studies (Wu, 1986). This system was highly regarded in competitive academic circles in the mainland of China and only accepts top-level students (Lin et al., 2024; Luo, 2011). Indeed, only top undergraduate graduates from selective universities have the chance to be recommended. Moreover, *Baoyan* is often seen as an extension of meritocracy, in which those who excel academically deserve fast-track access to advanced study. Yet the practical meaning of merit has narrowed amid credential inflation. Universities, therefore, rely on even finer distinctions to rank candidates. A marginal GPA difference or a minor competition award can produce substantial gaps in final rankings.

Regarding admission criteria, institutions are responsible for developing their own criteria. Despite slight variations across universities and majors, they often include requirements for GPA, foreign language proficiency, research participation, publications, subject competitions, and a range of non-academic activities. These criteria have shaped the meritocracy culture among university communities. Sun et al. (2022) noted that it represents one of the educational traditions of Confucianism, which emphasises perfection and societal contribution. Students must be extremely excellent throughout their undergraduate journey to secure eligibility for the recommendation. During their journeys, peer competition has intensified into a "rat race", exerting systemic pressure on candidates pursuing recommendations. To clarify, "obtaining recommendation eligibility" is the first step of *Baoyan*. After that, candidates must participate in interviews. Only upon passing the interview will they be admitted.

Although the system is supposedly an equal opportunity for upward mobility, it inevitably advantages students with prior access to academic resources and support networks, while borderline candidates face greater challenges than those with a high probability of securing the recommended places (Chen & Jiang, 2015). In any case, competition for the relatively few places has grown over approximately 4 decades, placing unprecedented pressure on borderline candidates (Zhang & Huang, 2022). Furthermore, in 2024, the number of recommended places increased again (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2024), while the number of admission slots at most universities remained unchanged, foreshadowing more intense competition and more candidates participating in the recommendation competition who ultimately fail to be recommended compared to the past. In this way, borderline candidates are facing much heavier challenges than before. However, existing studies mainly focus on a comprehensive analysis of the *Baoyan* system to propose policy suggestions for improvement. Borderline candidates for *Baoyan* remain a group that has rarely been discussed.

### 2.2 Psychological strain and unanticipated consequences

In higher education, the term "borderline candidates" has historically referred to individuals experiencing social isolation or academic failure within the school environment (Ghory & Sinclair, 1987). However, it is also used to describe students

on the verge of participating in higher education who face uncertainties or challenges that hinder their enrolment or success (Davies et al., 2009; Du, 2020). Jia & Li (2021) showed that Chinese students who scored above the elite-university cutoff were far more likely to attend a top-tier university than those just around the cutoff. Similarly, in many systems, borderline candidates are routinely denied admission to selective universities and redirected to other lower-tier ones, raising concerns about failure (Covarrubias et al., 2018). Within the *Baoyan* system in the mainland of China, borderline candidates are those whose academic performance and participation in social activities place them near the threshold of eligibility for recommendations. The fluctuating nature of their prospects exacerbates their uncertainty as pursuing recommendations that typically require sustained effort over the entire undergraduate period (Zhu & Zhou, 2025). In the meantime, owing to the long preparation horizon, high specialisation demands, and intense competition that characterise *Baoyan*, these institutional features are amplified within the recommendation system into high entry thresholds and an almost zero-sum contest, converting systemic competitiveness into sustained, high-intensity psychological pressure, which is felt most acutely by borderline candidates. This prolonged uncertainty often heightens their hesitation between striving for recommendations and considering alternative paths, such as taking the *Nationwide Master's Program Unified Admission Examination*. Meanwhile, to increase their eligibility, they often over-commit to academic, extracurricular, and social activities (Hai & Cheng, 2022). This would present them with trying to do better than others, which blinds them and brings them the following possible consequences: mental anxiety and academic burnout (Hong & Hanafi, 2024; Yi et al., 2022).

Compared to peers who have a high likelihood of securing recommendations, borderline candidates face dual pressures: the fear of failing in a competitive process and the regret of abandoning their pursuit altogether (Lv, 2023; Yang et al., 2022). Liu et al. (2024) revealed that elite Chinese university students sometimes undergo very high levels of stress and anxiety due to the fear of failure and eligibility uncertainty in pursuit of recommendations and other relevant competitions and examinations, which is very psychologically burdensome. Consequently, borderline candidates tend to prioritise visible achievements over real intellectual growth and curiosity. While these actions might enhance candidates' immediate eligibility for recommendation, they often undermine their long-term educational development, career prospects, and lifelong well-being. Then, these factors mostly lead to burnout symptoms because there are not only demanding academic schedules but also heavy extracurricular work throughout the process (Hai & Cheng, 2022). According to Lu & Sun (2024), their relentless pursuit of perfection, often driven by societal and familial expectations, exacerbates chronic stress and fatigue, further tipping the precarious balance so that ambition and well-being almost become mutually exclusive.

Moreover, the inherently competitive nature of the *Baoyan* system strains peer relationships. (Hai & Cheng, 2022) noted that students tend to view classmates as competitors rather than collaborators, resulting in feelings of isolation and a lack

of trust among peers. This social dynamic in this system perpetuates a cycle of stress and withdrawal, undermining the potential for peer support. Such pressures reflect broader challenges to social cohesion among students in the hyper-competitive educational environment. However, peer relationships, which could otherwise alleviate academic stress, are often eroded by the zero-sum structure of the *Baoyan* system. Over time, these dynamics impact not only the immediate well-being of borderline candidates but also their ability to build professional networks and develop interpersonal skills. Despite the significant role of the *Baoyan* system in shaping students' future trajectories, existing research primarily focuses on the macro-level aspects of *Baoyan* policies. Few studies have specifically examined or investigated the experiences of borderline candidates beyond academic performance. Therefore, addressing this gap is meaningful for understanding how the system affects the well-being and long-term development of these borderline candidates, and it provides guidance for Chinese higher education institutions' policy reform and the construction of support mechanisms.

Ultimately, the establishment of the *Baoyan* system is a public policy decision, while participation in the recommendation competition is an individual decision. Decisions can result in various consequences, some of which are considered accidental or part of the undesired effects. Undergraduate students derive these consequences from academic, institutional, or personal initiatives or practices, which can have unanticipated positive and negative side effects (Nescolarde-Selva et al., 2019). These consequences may stem from students' objectives, institutional designs, and societal expectations. Within the *Baoyan* system, such dynamics are likely to be especially pronounced, given the convergence of high-stakes decision-making, rigid quantitative metrics, and intense peer competition. Yet there is a clear gap in the current literature in this area: few studies have focused on borderline candidates' experience in the process of seeking recommendations.

### 2.3 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study (Fig. 1) integrates the causal chain of “institutional environment – individual reaction – unanticipated consequences” and the “stress–coping model”, aiming to explain how the borderline candidates in the process of pursuing *Baoyan* places fluctuate between structural forces and individual initiative, and thus have multi-dimensional impacts.

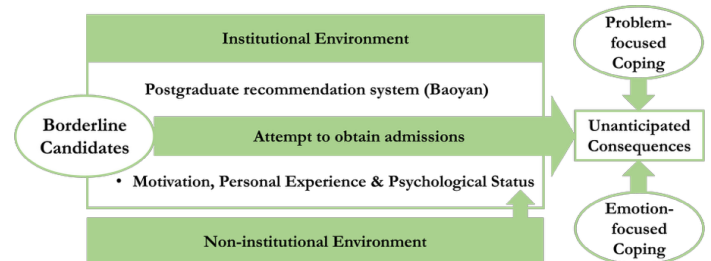


Fig. 1. Theoretical framework.

Within the institutional environment, the process of at-

tempting to secure a place for borderline candidates is regulated by a two-way regulation of motivation, personal experience, and psychological status. On the one hand, they internalise meritocratic evaluation criteria and continue to invest in research projects, subject competitions, and other non-academic activities. On the other hand, the long-term uncertainty of rankings brings psychological stress and anxiety (Folkman, 1984). When the tension between individual effort and institutional logic arises, the system, originally designed to select talent, unexpectedly produces side effects such as academic utilitarianism, peer pressure, and psychological stress (Merton, 1936).

When facing pressures, borderline candidates may either adopt objective-oriented coping strategies or resort to emotional regulation or avoidance in the face of stress. Both form a cycle with unanticipated consequences, in which effective coping can partially buffer negative impacts, while negative strategies may exacerbate them, further feeding back into the individual-institutional interaction.

Overall, by placing institutional pressure – individual reaction – consequence – coping strategy in a single logical chain, this theoretical framework reveals the dynamic mechanisms underlying the experiences of borderline candidates in *Baoyan* and provides theoretical support for the analysis and discussion of interview data.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1 Qualitative research design

A qualitative case study approach was adopted, consisting of semi-structured interviews, to capture and comprehensively understand borderline candidates' experiences and perceived unanticipated consequences in pursuing *Baoyan*. This approach allowed us to explore participants' perceptions and lived experiences within a specific context, while considering their diverse backgrounds and ways of seeing the world (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The semi-structured interviews will allow in-depth conversations to explore feelings, attitudes, and reflections on their pursuits (Adams, 2015). In terms of data analysis, thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns in borderline candidates' experiences and perceived unanticipated consequences on their pursuit, as no applicable theories have been put forward in this field.

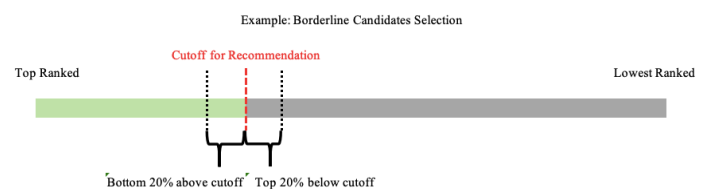
#### 3.2 Participant

In line with the study's research questions, the subjects were 8 master's program students from 2 top-tier universities included in the "Double First-Class" initiatives (see Table 1). The focus on Double First-Class universities was intentional, as these institutions typically have more *Baoyan* quotas and higher recommendation rates than other higher education institutions. Consequently, the level of internal competition is more intense, and the degree of uncertainty faced by borderline candidates is more pronounced, making their experiences particularly representative of the broader phenomenon. The 8 participants had all completed their *Baoyan* competitions. All of them are classified as borderline candidates, meaning

their rankings are within 20% above or below the cutoff point (see Fig. 2). In terms of gender, 4 were male, and 4 were female; regarding origin, 7 were from the Chinese mainland, and 1 was from Macau. Regarding the recommendations, 5 were admitted through *Baoyan*, while 3 failed. All participants were between 22 and 25 years old and studied education-related disciplines during their undergraduate studies. We selected undergraduates in Education as our research participants because, in the mainland of China labour market, humanities and social science majors, including Education, are often perceived as less employable than STEM fields, a bias reinforced by utilitarian orientations toward "practical" knowledge (Marginson & Yang, 2022). Furthermore, post-pandemic labour market pressures have further intensified credential competition, rendering Education cohorts a salient case of escalating 'rat-race' dynamics, psychological strain, and instrumental approaches to academic pathways. Therefore, this cohort provides a clear vantage point from which to examine how the structural features of the *Baoyan* system generate unintended psychological and academic consequences for borderline candidates.

**Table 1.** Participant characteristic.

No.	Age	Gender	Place of birth	Undergraduate program	Result
1	23	M	Hubei, China	Educational technology	Admitted
2	23	F	Macau, China	Special education	Admitted
3	22	F	Liaoning, China	Education	Admitted
4	22	F	Chongqing, China	Education	Admitted
5	22	F	Sichuan, China	Education	Admitted
6	23	M	Anhui, China	Educational technology	Fail
7	25	M	Chongqing, China	Educational technology	Fail
8	23	M	Henan, China	Educational technology	Fail



**Fig. 2.** Participant recruitment criteria.

*Note.* The "20%" means 20% of the *Baoyan* quota (e.g. if there are 30 quotas, then the 6 [20% of 30] above the cutoff and the 6 below the cutoff are borderline candidates)

In terms of recruitment strategy, this study utilised homogeneous sampling to invite participants who met the inclusion

criteria (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). Snowball sampling was used to expand the participant pool. Regarding the limitations of sampling methods, there is a risk of selection bias and reduced generalizability due to their inherent nature. However, borderline candidates are an extremely homogeneous group, and homogeneous sampling combined with snowball sampling maximised the reliability of both the research participants and the analysis results.

### 3.3 Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants who had either recently completed or had previously participated in the graduate recommendation competition. Before data collection, this study received ethical approval from the first author's university. All participants provided informed consent before participating and were informed about the purpose of the study, the interview procedures, and the use and retention periods of the interview data. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher assured participants that their personal information would be kept strictly confidential and that they could withdraw from the interview at any time if they felt uncomfortable.

All interviews were conducted in Mandarin via VooV Meeting between May and June 2025, each lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes, and were audio-recorded with the participants' permission. The recordings were subsequently transcribed and translated into English. Each participant was interviewed once. To ensure accuracy and transparency, the researcher reviewed the transcripts and clarified any ambiguities through follow-up contact with participants when necessary. They followed the study's flexible interview guideline and shared their feelings and reflections on the *Baoyan* system by responding to open-ended questions. These questions addressed their motivations for participating in the *Baoyan* competition, their personal experiences and reflections, and their evaluations and suggestions for the recommendation system.

### 3.4 Data analysis

Interview data were analysed through a six-stage inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). First, all interview transcripts were read multiple times to enhance the researcher's familiarity with the data. Then, open coding was conducted, with the researcher assigning meaningful units of text initial codes independently. These codes were iteratively reviewed, compared, and refined through constant thinking. Subsequently, similar codes were grouped into potential themes and subthemes, reflecting recurring patterns and salient issues identified across the dataset.

During the analysis, the coding framework was continually revised as insights emerged, shifting to ensure that the themes were grounded in participants' lived experiences rather than predetermined theoretical constructs. Nvivo 12 software was used to facilitate the organisation, coding, and retrieval of qualitative data. The final themes were reviewed with the entire dataset to ensure analytic coherence and to capture both convergent and divergent experiences of participants.

## 4. Findings

Through thematic analysis of eight interview transcripts, this study identified four themes, including psychological stress, academic burnout, utilitarian academic participation, peer relationships, and competition (Fig. 3), and revealed the coping strategies utilised by them. These themes illustrate the unanticipated consequences students face as they strive to meet *Baoyan* criteria in their pursuit of admission. They align with Merton's theory of unanticipated consequences. This section will discuss each theme separately and discuss how borderline candidates cope with these consequences. Each subsection is titled with a theme, summarises the main findings related to that theme, and includes direct quotes from the interviewees as evidence. All quotes are taken from the interview materials used in this study.

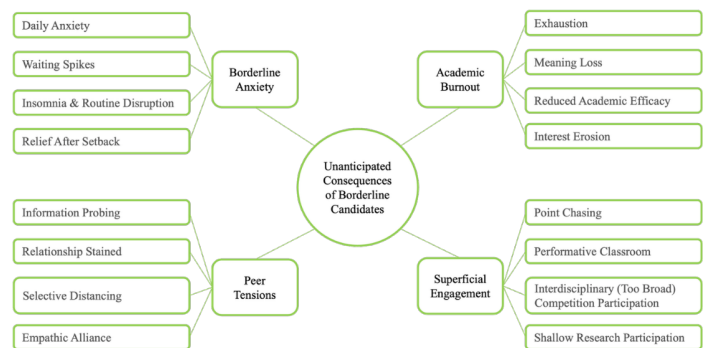


Fig. 3. Themes and sub-themes.

### 4.1 Borderline anxiety: Persistent psychological burden

The process of striving for a recommended place for postgraduate study has brought significant pressure to students with marginal qualifications. The interviewees generally mentioned that they were in a state of anxiety and tension for a long time, under the situation of intensive competition and uncertain results. As described by Folkman (1984), when individuals perceive that there are major threats and they are difficult to control, they often have a persistent stress response. In this case, many interviewees described in detail the psychological burden and negative emotions they endured.

When asked about their psychological status during the competition for recommendation places, anxiety and uncertainty were the most reported emotional experiences. Many students with marginal qualifications face significant uncertainty about whether they will be admitted to postgraduate programs. Participant 6 said that:

*“After learning that I had no chance to be recommended and had to prepare for the entrance examination in the first semester of my third year, I was affected by emotions day by day, because ... there was a lot of knowledge to study and review. And I worried whether I could complete it and whether the decision to take the entrance examination was correct.”* (Participant 6)

Participant 2 later described this psychological status as “almost one hundred percent” affected by uncertainty, and

persistent anxiety accompanied him all the time. Similarly, Participant 1 also had similar feelings, admitting that:

*"I was often anxious, and the closer it got to the announcement day of the recommendation list, the more anxious I became...especially when the final results were about to be released."* (Participant 1)

The anxiety reached its peak because, at that time, candidates could not do anything to improve their scores and could only wait helplessly for the results. This feeling of powerlessness in the face of unknown results further exacerbated their psychological pressure.

Meanwhile, many participants mentioned that anxiety has produced obvious physiological and emotional symptoms, showing a high level of stress. And the symptoms typically appear during periods of waiting for various results:

*"The competitive atmosphere for postgraduate entrance examinations has become more and more obvious since the first semester of my junior year ... I feel anxious physically, and I often cannot fall asleep all night, I was almost close to 'breaking down', and my attitude became extreme ... This is so painful ..."* (Participant 3)

More seriously, Participant 3 and Participant 4 admitted that the idea of suicide did arise when the situation was particularly bad. This extreme idea showed that some candidates tend towards depression and despair under the pressure of the *Baoyan* competition. In addition, Participant 3 mentioned that:

*"Sometimes ... when I am typing on the computer, I suddenly feel so miserable and cannot help crying, just like my body is out of control."* (Participant 3)

This spontaneous crying and emotional breakdown are a manifestation of physical and mental exhaustion under high pressure. Similarly, Participant 4 recalled that her physiological work and rest, and her emotional status, were seriously affected by the dual pressure of preparing for the postgraduate entrance examination and maintaining competitiveness in the *Baoyan* competition. She used to have a balanced daily schedule, but after starting to prepare for the examination and recommendations at the same time, the balance was disrupted:

*"My schedule became very chaotic, often going to bed at two or three o'clock in the morning and waking up at five or six o'clock. After waking up, I could not muster the energy to get up, and often kept crying ... I was very tired every day, crying often, and ... it seemed that my mood did not improve after crying."* (Participant 4)

Even after the interview for the *Baoyan* was finished, Participant 7 felt a strong physical and mental reaction:

*"I felt like vomiting after the interview ... I do not want to recall."* (Participant 7)

In general, most participants mentioned insomnia, loss of appetite, and mood swings, which are consistent with common physiological and psychological symptoms under extreme stress.

In addition to anxiety and insomnia, some participants also described emotional changes such as irritability and anger. Participant 2 and Participant 3 admitted that they and their peers who are also striving for recommendation places would "suddenly become very irritable, or suddenly get angry for no reason". However, afterwards, they would realise that temper

was "completely unnecessary, and that was not other people's problem." This irritability and emotional loss of control are also manifestations of excessive psychological load in a high-pressure environment.

It is worth noting that this psychological pressure comes not only from the fear of failure, but also from the high investment in the process and the improvement of self-requirements. Young (2006) noted that when society emphasises selecting elites based on merit, individuals will regard success as the primary criterion for measuring self-worth, thereby bearing the heavy pressure of success or failure. The following interview excerpt further showed similar situations:

*"I will use these standards to discipline myself... Others are working hard, but I am playing, so I will feel guilty, and then I worry that others have learned a lot during my playing time, and finally, others have achieved more results."* (Participant 3)

This ubiquitous comparison and self-pressure are precisely due to the fear of "falling behind" in the merit-based selection system. As a result, many students, even if they have not yet failed, have long lived in a highly tense state, just as Participant 5 said:

*"I was always nervous about the slightest change in the comprehensive test score."* (Participant 5)

In summary, borderline candidates experience sustained anxiety with physiological symptoms, driven by the interaction of scarcity of quotas and strict metrics with fear of failure and self-comparison, which are unanticipated consequences of a system originally designed to encourage and reward excellence.

## 4.2 Academic burnout: Exhaustion and disengagement

Under tremendous pressure and long-term intensive input, many participants showed signs of academic burnout. Academic burnout usually includes emotional and physical exhaustion, cynicism or indifference toward educational tasks, and a low sense of achievement or efficacy (Salmela-Aro & Upadaya, 2014). The interview excerpt showed that many borderline candidates experienced obvious exhaustion and decline in academic enthusiasm in their third and fourth years of college. Some people became tired of academic activities and even doubted their significance. This phenomenon is an unanticipated consequence of long-term participation in the *Baoyan* competition.

First, many participants reported physical and emotional exhaustion. The persistent anxiety, insomnia, and emotional breakdown mentioned above are not only manifestations of psychological pressure but also reflect that borderline candidates for *Baoyan* are already in a state of physical and mental exhaustion. For instance, Participant 3 stated that "physical and mental exhaustion" and "cannot sleep at night and physically and mentally exhausted during the day" indicate that she experienced severe physical and emotional exhaustion during the pursuit of a *Baoyan*. This exhaustion directly weakened borderline participants' energy to continue to invest in their studies. Furthermore, Participant 4 also shared about how

she was preparing for the postgraduate entrance examination and IELTS at the same time, and then temporarily switched to pursue a *Baoyan*. At that time, she felt disoriented after studying until 7 p.m. every day, showing obvious signs of fatigue and distraction. These are typical symptoms of burnout, caused by continuous, excessive academic investment, which leaves individuals unable to maintain an efficient learning routine.

Secondly, utilitarianism and a lack of sense of meaning in academic tasks are also important symptoms of academic burnout. Most of the participants confessed that their main motivation for participating in academic activities such as scientific research projects and subject competitions was not interest or enthusiasm for learning and research, but for the sake of points for *Baoyan*. Participant 5 pointed out sharply:

*“Many things in the process of Baoyan have no meaning except to add points for recommendation. I hate these things, but still had to participate in these meaningless activities for the sake of recommendation points...” (Participant 5)*

This boredom and utilitarian attitude towards academic tasks precisely shows that borderline candidates tend to experience burnout. They no longer believe that what they are doing is essentially valuable, but only regard it as a means to achieve recommended places. Similarly, Participant 2 illustrated:

*“Most of the time, the main purpose of my participation in competitions or application projects is for the sake of participating, to get extra points ... not out of academic interest.” (Participant 2)*

It is apparent that borderline candidates, in the long process of “padding grades and resumes”, gradually lost their enthusiasm for these activities themselves and developed an attitude of “participating just for finishing”, which is the manifestation of cynicism in burnout.

More seriously, some students also doubted the significance of their own efforts and reduced their emphasis on academic achievements. After experiencing the intense competition for *Baoyan*, the study attitude of borderline candidates changed significantly:

*“I gradually realised that all evaluations are using external standards to measure our own value; if we are overly bound by these quantitative results, life will become meaningless and tedious.” (Participant 3)*

In this reflection, Participant 3 began to downplay her views on grades and to assume poor examination grades were due to a lack of effort. However, attempting to be better is no longer a must since she considers examination grades irrelevant to personal value. This tendency suggests that she has become much less concerned with academic success or failure, and even a self-defensive explanation has emerged, attributing unsatisfactory grades to a temporary lack of effort and to no longer pursuing excellence. While this relieved the psychological pressure to some extent, it also reflected a weakening of academic motivation and a decline in engagement. In addition, she bluntly stated:

*“In the context of China’s test-based education, most students are still framed by this evaluation system ... there is no way to pursue a broader self-realisation of value.” (Participant 3)*

It implied that her aversion to the single-achievement evaluation system made her turn to seek a value identity beyond academics. This dissatisfaction with the system and a sense of meaninglessness are precisely the psychological adjustments after experiencing burnout.

Academic burnout is also reflected in the decrease of academic self-efficacy. Some participants gradually began to doubt their academic ability during the *Baoyan* process. Participant 4 shared a moving experience:

*“After completing the first draft of my undergraduate thesis, I once had an emotional breakdown, starting to believe that four years of undergraduate study did not teach me any skills at all and made me a very inferior person without any problem-solving skills and academic ability...” (Participant 4)*

This reflection shows that the prolonged competition and pressure not only exhausted her physically and mentally but also led her to doubt the rewards of the entire schooling process, resulting in a strong sense of powerlessness and self-denial. Although such extreme feelings later subsided, this certainly raises a potential concern about the *Baoyan* competition. Candidates, especially those on the borderline, whether they successfully obtained the recommendation places or not, some of them lose confidence in their academic abilities in the process, feeling exhausted and even questioning the value of higher education. This is also a manifestation of what Merton (1936) calls unanticipated consequences. The *Baoyan* system, intended to incentivise students to develop research skills and grow comprehensively, has instead led to academic burnout and self-doubt among some candidates, contrary to its original intent.

Finally, it is important to note that not all borderline candidates have completely lost interest in academics. Some participants noted that they also gained experience and honed their skills through research projects. For example, Participant 1 believed:

*“The process of completing the various tasks required for recommendation has provided me with some experience, such as research methods and logical thinking skills, which are relevant to what I may do in the future, both academically and in the workplace.” (Participant 1)*

However, it is worth noting that, even though these skills have improved, participants’ academic aspirations have not strengthened. Participant 1 admitted he had little interest in academics and planned to find a job at a technology company such as Tencent or ByteDance. Similarly, Participant 2 clearly stated that conducting research projects made her realise she did not like research “at all”, thereby strengthening her career goal of becoming an elementary school teacher. This suggests that the *Baoyan* competition did not inspire greater academic passion, but rather helped some borderline candidates recognise their true level of interest in research. This reveals that when postgraduate education is viewed more as a diploma to gain a competitive advantage than a journey of academic inquiry, students become less enthusiastic about engaging in academics itself, seeing it as a means rather than an objective (Collins et al., 2019).

### 4.3 Superficial engagement: Strategic academic behaviours

Driven by *Baoyan* competitions, borderline candidates' academic engagement behaviours have shown a clear tendency toward utilitarianism, manifested in the pursuit of quantifiable outcomes and superficial learning at the expense of inquiry into knowledge itself. This theme is a cause and manifestation of academic burnout, but it still warrants a separate discussion because it highlights how institutional pressures can alter borderline candidates' behavioural patterns and learning orientations. Young's (2006) view on meritocracy and Collins's (2019) discussion of credentialism explain this academically problematic phenomenon. When degrees become a competing resource, students are inclined to acquire credentials by utilitarian means rather than immersing themselves in the knowledge itself.

According to the interview excerpt, the strategies students use to gain extra points and honours exhibit clear instrumental rationality. Participants talked about deliberately participating in competitions, projects, and even non-major-related activities if they could get extra points or could make their resumes look better:

*"Because I got to know Baoyan too late, I started to participate in competitions in the second semester of my sophomore year. At that time, I was just trying to participate in everything ... You know, I majored in Education, and I studied liberal arts in high school, but I even tried the mathematical modelling competition."* (Participant 3)

*"I just tried it out. Everything I did was to increase my chances of getting the Baoyan place. I do not want to regret it in the future."* (Participant 7)

It can be observed that the strategy of casting a wide net reflects the fact that borderline candidates prioritise quantity over quality, and they are willing to try for competitions in fields they are not familiar with for the sake of extra points and resume refinement. In this mindset, the purpose of participation is not to learn, but to avoid missing out on possible opportunities to enhance their competitiveness in the *Baoyan* competition. It shows that when a *Baoyan* place becomes the main objective, activities originally intended to improve ability (e.g., research projects, subject competitions, and social work) are also reduced to purely objective-attainment tools, thereby weakening their educational significance.

Many participants admitted that much of their academic engagement at the undergraduate level was superficial and utilitarian. Students would be very utilitarian to make good relationships with teachers by means of:

*"I do not like it. When the teacher told a joke, some of my classmates laughed out loud in a very exaggerated way, just to make the teacher understand that they were listening. After almost every class, there were also students, sometimes ten, sometimes more, surrounding the teacher to ask questions or just listen. But if you listen to the questions those students asked carefully, you will know they were just pestering the teacher to leave an impression to get a higher GPA."* (Participant 5)

These pandering behaviours are not motivated by a genuine

desire to learn or an interest in discussion, but rather by a strategic motive. In a normal academic environment, these behaviours are unimaginable, but they have become the norm in the context of *Baoyan* competitions, with the sole purpose of getting the teacher to remember or recommend them.

Similarly, there is a tendency to emphasise form over substance in research projects and subject competitions. Participant 8 mentioned that when he was involved in a research project, he felt the activities themselves were not helpful for personal growth. However, he tried to find some benefits, such as improved writing skills and networking opportunities, in them to comfort himself that his time investment was worthwhile. Surprisingly, after finishing the entire recommendation process, he pointed out:

*"Doing these projects and competitions did not help me grow too much ... For example, academic writing skills are quite different from other types of writing in non-academic works. The networking chances are also limited, my supervisor just gives me one simple task and another, most of the tasks are searching for relevant articles and downloading them, I even need to learn the searching skills by myself, my supervisor is Prof. BiliBili (a video platform like YouTube)."* (Participant 8)

This suggests that the activities borderline candidates engaged in extensively for *Baoyan* remained at the surface level, focusing on simple tasks with limited academic enhancement. At the same time, given undergraduate students' average academic ability, most supervisors do not support them in publishing papers. However, undergraduate students with more social and cultural capital can publish papers more easily, even without their internal supervisors' support. This further stimulated borderline candidates' superficial engagements:

*"I found my friends in Business School and the Departments of Artificial Intelligence and participated in 3 different competitions. These departments have far more competitions than the Faculty of Education, and the only thing I need to do is write some brief introductions for their declaration form, then sit there and wait for the awards and extra points ... I have no means to publish papers, that is the only way I can try to win in the competition."* (Participant 7)

This indicates that, to demonstrate the comprehensiveness of the quantitative indicators, some indicators that not all students are qualified to pursue, or whose significance to the undergraduate education objective is doubtful, are included. As a result, borderline candidates chase these indicators for extra points, leading to the alienation of academic activities.

Under metric-driven competition, engagement shifts toward instrumental, surface-level "point chasing", eroding intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and deep learning. This instrumentalisation and loss of intrinsic motivation are unanticipated dysfunctions of the recommendation system's meritocratic logic.

### 4.4 Peer tensions: Borderline candidate's ambivalent relationships

The intense competition for *Baoyan* school places has a complex impact on candidates' peer relationships and interpersonal interactions. In a zero-sum game, classmates are both

competitors and potential supporters of one another. Interview excerpts suggest that *Baoyan's* process led to erosion of trust, implicit comparisons, and even the shadowing of otherwise close friendships across different interpersonal relationships. However, some classmates were also sympathetic and supportive of each other because of their shared experiences.

On the one hand, many participants felt that competition brought tension and disconnection to their peer friendships. Due to the scarcity of guaranteed graduate school places (often, only the top 15% to 30% of students in their year can get a place), every student close to the borderline is both worried about being surpassed by others and wants to surpass others. Under this mentality, suspicion and defensiveness are inevitable even among classmates or roommates who were originally close. The reported experience of Participant 2 is quite representative:

*"Even the best friendships will have some secret rivalries ... on the eve of Baoyan, one of my roommates probed me, directedly asked if I would give up my place because she heard I was planning to study abroad ... this is so insane, she was not focusing on her improvement and preparation, but rather on others."* (Participant 2)

Although she expressed understanding of this anxiety, the *Baoyan* competition made borderline candidates worry all the time. However, there is no denying that the atmosphere within the dormitory, which was pure, has changed and become sensitive and subtle.

*"Everyone is less relaxed, and the trust that we had built was destroyed."* (Participant 2)

*"Normal interpersonal relationships were alienated and stained with the dust of benefits."* (Participant 5)

This formulation vividly reveals how competition erodes interpersonal trust. Instead of talking to each other about everything, classmates have reservations, fearing that others will benefit from the information they generously share, or that their excessive concern for others has ulterior motives. Participant 6 also observed a similar phenomenon:

*"The classmates around me largely had some competition with me, and some of them had bad thoughts or even hostility towards me. For me, I would have less communication with them because my focus during that time was on examination preparation. I usually leave my dormitory at 8 a.m. and get back at 10 p.m."* (Participant 6)

In other words, Participant 6 avoided conflict by distancing himself so as not to get involved in unnecessary friction. While this kept the peace on the surface, it also weakened existing social ties and interactions. Different from Participant 6's active distancing, Participant 4's case was quite passive:

*"My ranking was medium, I remember it was 43/90, and my classmates did not regard me as a strong competitor ... and no one would pry into what I was doing or ask me about my progress."* (Participant 4)

Therefore, it is conceivable that those borderline candidates whom everyone watches are often the very subjects of strained relationships.

On the other hand, we should also see the positive effects and mutually supportive aspects of *Baoyan* competition. Despite the zero-sum competition, some participants maintained

positive interactions with their classmates and even became closer because of the pressure they faced together. They believed that, despite fierce competition, there was a sense of mutual sympathy because their anxieties were essentially similar, and they considered each other the driving force that kept them going in pursuit of *Baoyan* places (Participant 3 and Participant 5). This reveals the unifying aspect of competition.

In addition, some participants believed that the competitive environment also brought positive opportunities for collaboration. Participant 1 claimed:

*"The process of Baoyan was hard to rely on oneself alone; everyone had to work with peers to do some projects, and then it was easy to make new friends. I got to know some borderline candidates whom I was not familiar with while working on projects and learned a lot from them."* (Participant 1)

This further suggests that, in many situations, competition does not block collaboration. On the contrary, borderline candidates formed communities and supported each other because they needed to team up to accomplish tasks such as research and competitions. This relationship between cooperation and competition was also illustrated by Participant 3:

*"After entering my third year, I became more aware that academic performance was related to several factors such as family resources and networks, so I would not judge others for their performance, and would not be hostile or envious of others' success."* (Participant 3)

For better or worse, this competition simultaneously undermines trust and fosters situational solidarity. This ambivalence in peer relations is an unanticipated social cost of a zero-sum selection mechanism.

#### **4.5 Coping strategy: Borderline candidates' survival tactics**

Facing tremendous pressure and competition, borderline candidates are not passive but have developed a variety of coping strategies to regulate their emotions, alleviate stress, and adapt to the intensive environment. Folkman's (1984) stress-coping theory categorises coping into two categories: problem-oriented and emotion-oriented. Participants showed how they found psychological support and a way out of this protracted battle in multiple ways, including self-adjustment, seeking social support, cognitive reappraisal, and avoidance and abandonment. Among these coping strategies, both positive and negative coexist, reflecting borderline candidates' adaptive wisdom and limitations in high-pressure environments.

First, many participants adopted self-regulation and psychological construction to alleviate anxiety:

*"I mainly focused on self-regulation ... I tried to adjust my mindset by myself when I encountered mood swings."* (Participant 1)

*"For me, I told myself to try my best whenever I face challenges."* (Participant 6)

This firm belief was a problem-oriented coping strategy that focused on the set objective and giving it their best effort to ward off external and internal insecurities. Participant 6 also reduces stress by using this strategy:

*"I always thought that since I chose to do it, I should stop wavering and gain a sense of stability from doing actual things." (Participant 6)*

This mindset effectively prevented borderline candidates from falling into excessive anxiety. Similarly, Participant 5 made positive cognitive adjustments when not being selected for an important research project application and felt hopeless about being recommended. At first, she was very anxious about every point in the *Baoyan* evaluation. Still, after failing the project application, she felt unprecedentedly relaxed and kept telling herself that it did not matter if she was not recommended, because she could still take the examination. In Participant 5's case, she reframed not being recommended as an opportunity to lift some pressure. This is a typical emotion-oriented coping strategy that reduces emotional stress by changing one's perception of the situation. Therefore, borderline candidates will use self-talk and mental suggestions to combat anxiety.

Secondly, seeking social support was a common strategy among participants. Understanding and comfort from others (e.g. family, friends, or supervisors) during stressful times is crucial to borderline candidates' psychological status:

*"The ones who gave me more support were my friends and boyfriend, they were in similar situations with me and could understand me with just a glance." (Participant 3)*

*"I talked to my friends, my family, and my partner, sharing my worries and concerns." (Participant 2)*

*"When I felt stressed, I invited my friends to play football ... They helped me a lot" (Participant 6)*

Regarding universities' internal professional psychological support (counselling), most participants expressed distrust due to the age gap (older people being seen as authorities), identity differences (since most consultants are teachers), and concerns about privacy breaches. Only Participant 6 participated in a formal consultation, but did not continue. Therefore, universities should implement mechanisms that build trust and protect confidentiality in their psychological support services, encouraging more students to seek help.

Moreover, it should be noted that some coping strategies are relatively negative or helpless, but they are also choices for borderline candidates under great pressure. For example, avoiding communication is a short-term means of self-protection. Participant 4 found that communicating with parents about stress did not help but added to her anxiety, since her parents cannot understand her, and even thought that she was moaning about nothing, so she decided not to bother them. Besides, some participants also resorted to superstition to seek psychological comfort. Participant 3 mentioned:

*"When I was extremely anxious, I would read some horoscopes ... even go to a fortune teller to get a hint about whether I would be successful in Baoyan." (Participant 3)*

Admittedly, superstition and divination are not scientifically proven approaches, but they provide an emotional catharsis and an illusory sense of certainty. For borderline candidates suffering in uncertainty, even if the reliability of a horoscope is questionable, the process of reading it may briefly divert attention and provide psychological comfort.

During the recommendation process, students adopt

mixed coping strategies, including problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance approaches, with varying effectiveness, in line with stress-coping theory. In this study, it is encouraging to note that many participants demonstrated self-regulation and a spirit of mutual support, which undoubtedly enabled them to walk through this intensive journey, regardless of success or failure.

#### 4.6 Summary of findings

When borderline candidates participate in *Baoyan*, psychological stress is the most salient and pervasive experience, including experiencing chronic anxiety and uncertainty, and displaying clear symptoms of physical and psychological stress. Academic burnout emerged after intense "involution", with many becoming exhausted and developing apathy and scepticism about academic engagement. Driven by a utilitarian approach to academic engagement, overemphasising quantifiable outcomes at the expense of the essence of learning, leading to superficial learning and diminished interest in academics. Peer relationships, on the other hand, undergo complex changes in competition, with disconnection and suspicion on the one hand, and mutual support and solidarity on the other. In the face of many challenges, borderline candidates adopted diverse coping strategies to adjust themselves, which buffered the negative effects of stress to some extent (see Table 2).

This part provides a foundation for subsequent discussion. The next part will further discuss the implications of these findings, reflect on the plausibility of the current *Baoyan* system, and suggest possible improvements to reduce the stress of borderline candidates and promote healthy student development.

### 5. Discussion

While existing research on the *Baoyan* system in the mainland of China has largely been developed within the context of comprehensive system evaluation, this study enriches the limited literature on the experiences of borderline candidates seeking recommendation places. After interviewing eight borderline candidate participants, it is much clearer that their experiences do not simply testify to an established theory but are more like a tug-of-war between the established meritocratic system and individual subjectivity. It is worthwhile to put the findings back into the macro-contexts of massification of higher education, opportunity hoarding, and meritocracy.

The original intention of the *Baoyan* system was to reward excellence and select talent, but it has given rise to a series of systemic problems that especially place immense pressure on borderline candidates. Building on Merton's framework of unanticipated consequences, we contextualise the *Baoyan* system as a meritocratic policy outcome whose structural features, such as scarcity of quotas, harsh quantitative metrics, and uneven distribution of social and cultural capital, create conditions that yield unanticipated academic and psychological outcomes. Borderline candidates function as a typical case that makes visible the system's latent functions: practices intended to encourage and reward excellence paradoxically crowd cog-

**Table 2.** Findings summary.

Theme	Sub-theme	Negative consequences (-)	Positive consequences (+)
Borderline anxiety	Daily anxiety	- Persistent, near-constant worry - Attentional fragmentation - Early emotional depletion - Felt loop of “could lose anytime”	
	Waiting spikes	- Sharp stress surges - Efficacy drops - Compulsive message checking heightens uncertainty - Fosters short-term tactical thinking	
	Insomnia & routine disruption	- Sleep deprivation - Deteriorating physical/mental health	
	Relief after setback	- Structural pressures reassert	+ Psychological release and cognitive reappraisal
Academic burnout	Exhaustion	- Productivity collapse	
	Meaning loss	- Intrinsic value erosion - Activities viewed as purely instrumental - Undermines long-term academic motivation	+ Triggers reflective critique of metric validity
	Reduced academic efficacy	- Avoidance of deep learning - Negative performance spiral	
	Interest erosion	- Repeated shallow tasks confirm low intrinsic research interest	+ Earlier clarification of alternative career path
Superficial engagement	Point chasing	- Quantity over depth crowds out deep learning time - Escalates competitive pressure	
	Performative classroom	- Distorts classroom interaction equity - Reinforces erroneous signal “visibility - substance”	
	Interdisciplinary (too broad) competition participation	- Low-relevance activities consume time with limited domain skill gain - Failures amplify frustration	+ Occasional exposure to new perspectives
	Shallow research participation	- Learning-output mismatch - Fuels “busy-low yield-work harder” self-fulfilling spiral	
Peer duality	Information probing	- Surveillance of peers’ progress erodes trust - Heightens comparative anxiety	
	Relationship stained	- Friendships perceived as stained - Amplifies perceived inequity in social capital distribution	
	Selective distancing	- Isolation	
	Empathic alliance		+ Mutual understanding + Shared information & emotional support buffer anxiety
Coping strategies	Structured goal setting	- Intensify “point-chasing” pressure	+ Create a sense of control
	Emotional venting	- Deepen rumination and disrupt sleep	+ Provide rapid tension release
	Peer support chats	- Exacerbates competitive pressure.	+ Temporarily alleviates anxiety and loneliness
	Physical activity	- Trigger guilty and “catch-up” panic	+ Brief break in the anxiety

nition and effort into credential-optimising behaviours that diminish substantive learning and collegiality. By specifying the mechanism chain from the recommendation system, this study further contextualises Merton's theory beyond classic political and sociological domains (Mica, 2017; Solinas-Saunders & Stacer, 2015) into the higher education context in the mainland of China and shows how context-specific factors influence the intensity and form of these unanticipated effects.

More specifically, we situate Merton's concepts within a higher education system with a long-standing exam-oriented culture, high-stakes credentialism, and rooted narratives of meritocracy. By investigating how borderline candidates experience and narrate the system through heightened anxiety, strategic self- and peer-comparison, and instrumental study routines, we further interpret Merton's abstract categories of latent function and unanticipated consequences as empirically accessible aspects of students' everyday academic lives. The study also offers a perspective of how they are amplified, muted, or refracted by local configurations of labour-market uncertainty, institutional stratification and family expectations in the mainland of China, which indicated that the unintended outcomes of meritocratic devices are not accidental side-effects at the margins, but constitutive elements of how such systems are lived, justified and reproduced by those who occupy borderline positions (Dai & Pham, 2024; Mok et al., 2016; Wu, 2025).

The macro-trend in higher education depicted in the existing literature and the ecology of *Baoyan* largely coincide, providing concrete evidence and additional insights into some phenomena. The mass expansion of Chinese higher education since 1999 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2024) has led to credential inflation, with master's degrees increasingly becoming a bargaining chip in the new qualification race, and the competition is continuing to intensify. Borderline candidates' experience further evidenced this by commonly and strongly rejecting entering the job market while desperately pursuing admission to a master's program, no matter what it takes. Then, the "merit" is increasingly narrowly measured in the context of credential inflation (Chen & Jiang, 2015), where a difference of 0.01 points in GPA or a small competition award can make the difference between success and failure. It is true that borderline candidates were generally concerned about small GPA gaps and extra points and were scrambling to participate in various activities to gain even a slight advantage.

The findings align with much of the discussion on *Baoyan* criteria and the "rat race" environment they create (Hai & Cheng, 2022; Zhuang & Liu, 2025), as borderline candidates have invested significant time and energy in activities with very low marginal returns. As for those non-borderline candidates who rank higher, they may also face a similar problem: their original rankings were based on GPA; activities outside of coursework are still necessary. Therefore, borderline candidates, along with other candidates, are forced to formalise to fulfil these quantitative requirements, leading to a decline in the quality of academic engagement. Moreover, the existing literature suggests that *Baoyan* nominally provide everyone with equal opportunities for upward mobility

(Chen & Jiang, 2015; Liang & Li, 2011), but, in practice or unintentionally, prioritise candidates with greater social and cultural capital. Analysis of the interview excerpt supports that candidates from prestigious universities or with invisible capital are more likely to stand out from the competition, while candidates who lack resources must work harder and have a lower chance of winning. Additionally, candidates with invisible capital normally will not rank around the borderline, making this structural inequality exacerbate the stress and disadvantage of borderline candidates.

Furthermore, the findings resonate with the discussion of *Baoyan*'s impact on campus atmosphere and interpersonal relationships (Hai & Cheng, 2022; Liang & Li, 2011; Luo, 2011), indicating that candidates are competing for rankings, wariness permeates friendships, and mutual support is weakened. In short, this study corroborates the literature review with a micro perspective, highlighting how the broader context of massification of higher education and credential inflation refracts into the struggles of borderline candidates in *Baoyan*. The situation of borderline candidates vividly portrays the previous macro-analysis of the *Baoyan* system. It also highlights under-discussed details, such as candidates' coping strategies, that add a new dimension to the literature.

## 6. Conclusion

This study systematically revealed the ripple effects of *Baoyan* competition at the psychological, behavioural, and interpersonal levels through semi-structured interviews with borderline candidates of the competition and thematic analysis incorporating unanticipated consequences theory, credentialism, meritocracy, and stress-coping theory. The findings showed that the performance-oriented quantitative index system not only brought borderline candidates significant and persistent stress and academic burnout, but also prompted them to adopt a utilitarian and superficial approach to academic engagement, while peer relationships oscillated between tension and fragile solidarity. By complementing macro research with a micro perspective and integrating unanticipated consequences theory to elucidate the interactive mechanisms among higher education institutions, psychology, and behaviour, this study expanded the literature on the evolution of higher education and academic competition in China. The findings remind universities of their responsibility to optimise the evaluation system for *Baoyan*, strengthen psychological and academic support, and reshape collaborative peer and campus culture. Only by breaking through the single quantitative index used for kidnapping and diluting the zero-sum mentality through collaborative research project participation and team competitions can we truly relieve structural pressure and promote the comprehensive and healthy development of students.

Additionally, this study has several limitations that temper the interpretation and generalizability of its findings. First, the small sample size limits the external validity and transferability of insights across the mainland of China's higher education landscape. Second, the sample is relatively homogeneous, which primarily consists of students from education-related majors and high-status institutions. This may bias perspectives

toward elite settings and underrepresent experiences in other disciplines and institutional tiers. Third, reliance on self-reported data introduces potential recall and social desirability biases. Future research should employ larger, multi-site, and regionally diverse samples, incorporate disciplinary breadth and institutional stratification, and use mixed-method and longitudinal designs to enhance representativeness, causal inference, and temporal depth. Future research can expand the scope of institutions and disciplines and combine field observation, quantitative questionnaires, and longitudinal tracking to assess the long-term impact of *Baoyan* experiences on candidates' career paths and psychological well-being. Through the stories of borderline candidates, we can see the costs that the system unanticipatedly imposes on the relatively vulnerable. Therefore, only through simultaneous reflection and reform at the institutional and campus levels can we ensure that the objectives of "selecting the best" and "educating the best" are synchronously realised.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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