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# Pedagogies of care or reproduction of inequality? The *banzhuren's* role in Chinese higher education

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## ABSTRACT

The *banzhuren* is a distinctive hybrid figure in Chinese higher education who combines teaching and caring responsibilities. This study explores the multifaceted role of the *banzhuren*, through qualitative semi-structured interviews with senior undergraduates and faculty in one Chinese university. Three themes are derived. First, students perceive the *banzhuren* as a regular professor as well as a safety net, highlighting the unique authority and rapport built with this role. Second, the *banzhuren* provides constructive suggestions for students' future prospects and cares for their emotional well-being through various means. Third, the *banzhuren's* decisive role in the construction of the class committee, akin to a prefect system, grants certain students privileged access to exclusive opportunities. This research highlights that pedagogies of care should be examined through a critical lens which reveals it to be more complex than a seemingly benign practice separate from the reproduction of inequality.

班主任是中国高等教育中独特的混合角色，兼具教学与关怀责任。本研究通过对中国某高校的高年级本科生和教师进行半结构化的质性访谈，探讨班主任的多重职能，并归纳出三个主题。首先，学生既将班主任视为普通教授，又将其看作安全保障，凸显了这一角色独特的权威性和与学生建立的密切关系。其次，班主任通过多种方式为学生未来发展提供建设性建议，同时关注他们的情感需求。第三，班主任在班委会构建中发挥决定性作用，该班委会类似于学监（*prefect*）制度，使部分学生获得优先接触独特机会的特权。本研究强调，应以批判性视角审视关怀教育，揭示其复杂性，而非将其简单视为一种独立于社会不平等再生产之外的良性实践。

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## Introduction

This research revolves around a distinctive leadership role within Chinese educational institutions across all stages, including higher education, known as the '*banzhuren*'. The *banzhuren* serves a unique function that caters to students' academic needs as

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regular teaching staff while simultaneously caring for their emotional and moral development on a daily basis (Zhao 2021). Teachers' acts of care have been placed at the centre of teacher–student relations, which is argued to shape students' cognitive thinking process on the premise that knowledge is not individually but collectively constructed (Vygotsky 1978). In higher education, caring is studied for its integral role in enhancing student's motivation, engagement, mental well-being and overall learning experience (Rattray 2018; Walker-Gleaves 2019). However, largely underpinned by dominant neo-liberal discourses, the relational aspects of an undergraduate's life are prone to be overlooked (Tang, Walker-Gleaves, and Rattray 2021) as students are configured as rational independent consumers hoping to get the most of their investments and teachers as facilitators with expertise. Most existing studies on care in higher education have explored gendered caring practices (Mariskind 2014), care and student engagement (Barnacle and Dall'Alba 2017), etc. in European contexts, while practices in other cultures are underresearched. The *banzhuren* as a hybrid role is distinct in the way that it diverges from the boundaries seen in other contexts between teaching carried by lecturers and caring by personal tutors or counsellors. Further, while the *banzhuren*'s roles in educational structures prior to higher education (e.g. Gu, Chen, and Li 2015; Li and Chen 2013) have been investigated, a review of the literature did not reveal studies exploring their responsibilities in Chinese higher education. This article aims to address this gap by examining *banzhuren*'s daily practice with a particular focus on pedagogies of care, highlighting the intricate dynamics of teacher–student relationships and emphasizing the potential for these to reinforce inequality. These implications extend beyond the Chinese national context.

'*Banzhuren*' is a term derived from Chinese pinyin, the phonetic symbol for Chinese Mandarin. It is also known as homeroom teacher (Liu and Barnhart 1999), or head teacher (Feng and Li 2016) in the international literature. In Chinese schools, the homeroom serves as a central hub for students' daily activities, where students stay all day for nearly all subjects and social interactions (Liu 1997). Its fixed base and lack of student transition are distinguished from the fluid student movement across different classrooms seen in other countries such as the US (Coombs et al. 2022). The homeroom teacher is a leader who assumes various roles, including classroom management, coordination with other teachers, communication with parents, and overseeing students' academic progress, moral education, health, and safety (ibid.).

As a result of performing these duties, the homeroom teacher has closer interactions with students than regular subject teachers, supervising students during various self-study periods and recess, and holding weekly meetings (Liu, Liu, and Xie 2018). The intimate interaction with students fosters the development of values, such as cooperation, care, solidarity, and individual commitment to the class. The homeroom teacher is also known as the 'head teacher' in the literature, but the latter carries with it a connotation of professional excellence, suggesting that the head teacher is more senior, experienced and competent than regular teachers.

However, the roles of the *banzhuren* in universities differ from those in compulsory education. In the case study university where this research was conducted, the traditional homeroom structure is not observed, as students transit between different classrooms. Additionally, the university requires every academic to take the *banzhuren* role regardless of their seniority. Therefore, 'homeroom teacher' and 'head teacher' may not be

appropriate and the term *banzhuren* is used to accurately reflect the multifaceted nature of the role and its responsibilities, which extends beyond academic monitoring to encompass moral education, administrative affairs, career counselling, and the organization of extra-curricular activities (Chen and Zhao 2022). ‘Ban’ is the Chinese word for class, and ‘zhuren’ can be translated into ‘director’. However, it should not be taken as the equivalent of a class director because the *banzhuren*s at universities concern themselves with multiple tasks expected of a Programme Director in English-speaking universities (Zhu 2009). This article explores the distinctive role of the *banzhuren* in Chinese higher education, highlighting the diverse responsibilities they undertake to shape students’ educational experiences.

## Literature review

While no research on the *banzhuren* at Chinese universities has been found, caring from regular Chinese teachers integrated into pedagogical approaches is positively associated with undergraduate academic performance in offline (Lu 2016) and online settings (Zhao, Zhang, and Yao 2023). Aside from teacher’s pedagogical care, Tang et al. (2023) highlight holistic care (nurturing student’s character with individualized guidance), and relational care (recognizing student’s emotional needs through fostering teacher–student bonds) for their potential in empowering and enlightening Hong Kong undergraduates’ learning and career, providing constant psychological comfort, even building sustainable teacher–student relationships that buffer against challenges beyond graduation (Tang, Walker-Gleaves, and Rattray 2021). However, while previous research emphasizes the significance of academics responding to student’s academic and emotional needs, examining the role of *banzhuren* might present new insights, as the *banzhuren* may not always be a voluntary responsibility for teachers, and it entails a heavy workload not only consisting of direct interaction with students expected of regular academics, but also mediating peer relationships through organizing the class committee (Liu, Liu, and Xie 2018). Therefore, this research mainly draws on the concept of *relational pedagogy* to understand the relationship not only between the *banzhuren* and undergraduate students but also among students. Additionally, as certain students could be rewarded exclusive information when the *banzhuren* intervenes in peer relationships, relational pedagogy is supplemented by Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of capital to unveil the hidden inequalities potentially created and reinforced.

### *Relational pedagogy: teacher–student relation*

For first-year students embarking on a new journey in higher education, the development of positive and supportive relationships with peers and academics remains of significance to many, as they may have to cut ties with previous networks (Gravett and Winstone 2022). The importance of connections further manifests under the ‘current climate of marketization’ of higher education (Quinlan 2016, 108), as individual students’ personalities could go unnoticed in the assumed homogeneity of large cohorts seen as consumers ‘in the same boat’ (Lygo-Baker, Kinchin, and Winstone 2019). Apart from this, research attests to other benefits for students if meaningful relations are in place, such as the ‘buffer’ effect of a tutor–student relationship in addressing challenges (Ross et al. 2014), and the enhanced

student engagement in learning (Walker-Gleaves 2019). Further, there could be detrimental effects of a lack of such relations, represented by alienation, understood as the students' separation from others and more importantly their own selves, posing risks to students' academic progress and mental well-being (Barnhardt and Ginns 2014).

The concept of relational pedagogy, which places an emphasis on the interaction and relationships between educators, students and environment (Bovill 2020), has been studied by a number of scholars (e.g. Chika-James 2020; Gravett, Taylor, and Fairchild 2021) for its role in nurturing a supportive higher education environment. First, for relations between teacher and students, Gravett and Winstone (2022) suggest authenticity as the key factor that builds meaningful relationships, indicating that teachers should not deploy formulaic responses in addressing students' needs but instead demonstrate care through showing interest in students' personal lives with individualized responses. To attend to others with empathy is argued to represent 'attuned responsiveness' (Dall'Alba, 2009, 68) that builds trust and lays the foundation of dialogue between teachers and students. With the principles of care, empathy and respect in line, teachers in higher education could adopt various strategies, including early encounters with students outside of the classroom minutes prior to the lesson (Bovill 2020), and knowing students' names and treating students as friends (Walker-Gleaves 2019).

However, there remains the challenge of the effective enactment of care in higher education, arising from teacher's availability to cater to the needs of large cohorts and pervasive discourses of student satisfaction arguably underpinned by marketization and neoliberalism. Even if it is feasible to provide care to every student, an oversimplistic conception of care could also raise questions of the impact of a 'therapeutic' culture of too much care (Ecclestone 2012), and a potentially patronizing climate. Further, various scholars (e.g. Gilligan 1982; Tronto 1993) have argued that the enactment of care is built on the long tradition of socially constructed gender roles, leading to an unequal distribution of caring responsibilities between males and females. This is noteworthy when considering how care-associated work is often undertaken by females, rendering it feminized and devalued as secondary compared to roles deemed masculine and essential, such as the role of teaching (Motta and Bennett 2018).

### ***Relationship between students***

The second domain of relational pedagogies is the relation between students and how higher education institutions might facilitate the development of such bonds. Peer relationships are argued to be the strongest indicator of student adjustment and university attachment in each year group (Maunder 2018) and are also linked to students' sense of belonging and perseverance in studies (Strayhorn 2018).

Beyond common student friendships, undergraduate students have been found to be assisting their peers' learning since the 1700s as paraprofessional staff (Colvin and Ashman 2010), harnessing the impacts of peer relationships to improve teaching quality and doing more with less (Stigmar 2016). In contrast to the teacher-student relationship, peer-mentoring engages a student mentor of a similar status to the mentee as a partner in routine teaching (Colvin and Ashman 2010). Two primary functions of student mentors are the task-related function that provides academic and professional guidance, and the psychological function that supports mentees in personal

affairs (Terrion and Leonard 2007). Building on this, scholars today have explored peer mentoring further with regards to its role in graduate education (Lorenzetti et al. 2019), in first-year transition as a critical strategy (Lane 2020), and in promoting inclusive education of disabled students (Hillier et al. 2019), etc. The student mentors equip novices in a new academic community with relevant knowledge and skills, act as liaisons between them and the staff, and inspire and coach younger students while enhancing their perseverance through higher education. Moreover, the benefits tend to be reciprocal as both mentors and mentees were found to possess a higher level of understanding of disciplinary knowledge and develop friendships during the process (Lorenzetti et al. 2019).

The relations between student mentors and mentees see certain overlaps with teacher–student relations, as mentors, take a scaffolding role while operating under institutional regulations. However, while the student mentor–mentee relations can contribute to the establishment of a nurturing community as a valuable asset for student engagement (Christie 2014), too much support could overwhelm the less experienced students or coax them into overly relying on the help as a ‘crutch’, and being a mentor could expose oneself to the danger of becoming vulnerable from the time and emotions invested (Maunder 2018).

### ***Potential inequality of power***

Further, the student mentor–mentee relations may reinforce inequality of power. The benefits conferred to mentors could have resonance beyond their immediate experience, as they build more confidence and skills in working with students and staff and the institution may lift certain barriers to information (Seery et al. 2021). Consequentially, benefits to volunteering mentors could lie in the increased cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1986), which might exceed the expectations of undertaking an altruistic service role. In this way, while there is a lack of research in different programmes for corroboration, it can be argued that the gap of knowledge and resources, and ultimately power, could be entrenched between student mentors and mentees, and among the senior student population between those who take the mentor role and those who opt not to.

The potential power imbalance induced by peer-mentoring resonates with Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of different forms of capital. In higher education, cultural capital refers to student’s education and training as well as their style of speech and presentation accredited and underpinned by specific values and norms at the institutional and department level (ibid.). Social capital emphasizes building and expanding networks that could circulate different opportunities for students and connect them to the ‘right’ person for help if the need ever arises (Tavares et al. 2015). Both capitals can be mediated by and converted to economic capital. In exploring the relationships between the banzhuren and students and between students themselves arising from the banzhuren’s practices, certain undergraduates may have privileged access to exclusive information, thus rendering Bourdieu’s theory relevant for understanding the hidden impact of the banzhuren’s role on educational and social inequality.

### **Methodology**

This research is based on unexpected findings from a comparative research study. The original comparative research aimed to explore the development of

undergraduate research capability in social sciences in China, the UK and US adopting qualitative methodology. The rationale of the research lies in a lack of understanding of different conceptualizations of the term ‘research capability’ and pertinent institutional practices in Chinese, the UK and US higher education, especially in social science departments. Research questions (RQ) are presented in Table 1.

One comprehensive research university with a reputable Sociology programme was selected as a case study in each country respectively. After ethical approval was obtained from all the case study universities, semi-structured interviews were conducted with both senior undergraduates and academics to explore their lived experiences (Denzin and Lincoln 2005) and perceptions of undergraduate research, and to gain different perspectives of the curriculum, assessment, teaching and learning that pertains to students’ research training and practices for a comprehensive understanding. Purposeful and snowball sampling was applied for all case study universities. After the data collection at the UK university was completed, a number of themes emerged, such as criticality (Wang 2024a, 2024b), and online learning and research training (Wang 2024a, 2024b), then data was collected in China. The Chinese university was approached due to its prestigious place in the national and social science disciplinary ranking, making it a suitable choice for comparison with other case study universities. Senior undergraduates (third- and fourth-year students) and academics in Sociology were invited via email, out of consideration that they might have more experience in research than junior ones, and initial participants invited their colleagues and friends. In total, 11 students and 3 academics agreed to participate (see table 2)

A pilot interview with one of the students was conducted to test the methodology, which was successful and added to the formal interviews. Surprisingly, in the pilot interview, when asked whether there was any support from the academics that the student found helpful in research training, the student’s account emphasized the role of the *banzhuren* in not only his academic pursuits but also personal navigation of the university, and the nuanced relationships constructed between the *banzhuren* and different types of students. It became clear that the relations constructed with others, in particular with the *banzhuren*, occupied a central place in this undergraduate student’s life, and it appeared that it could not be separated from their experience of the curriculum, teaching, and development of research capability in the programme. An additional research question for this unexpected theme thus emerged, which is: what role does the *banzhuren* play in undergraduate life in social sciences, in regards to their academic pursuit and beyond? In order to probe deeper into this theme, extra

**Table 1.** Research questions for the original research.

RQ 1	How is undergraduate research capability conceived of in social sciences in Chinese, the UK and US contexts as reflected in university curriculums?
RQ 2	In what ways do the academic faculty in universities in China, the UK and US perceive the importance of undergraduate research capability and develop it in social science departments?
RQ 3	How do Chinese undergraduate students learning social sciences in these universities perceive research capability development?
RQ 4	What experiences do Chinese undergraduate students learning social sciences in these universities have in developing their research capability?



**Table 2.** Participants' profiles.

Student 1	Male	Chinese	Sociology	Fourth-year
Student 2	Female	Chinese	Sociology	Fourth-year
Student 3	Male	Chinese	Sociology	Fourth-year
Student 4	Female	Chinese	Sociology	Fourth-year
Student 5	Female	Chinese	Sociology	Fourth-year
Student 6	Female	Chinese	Sociology	Third-year
Student 7	Female	Chinese	Sociology	Fourth-year
Student 8	Female	Chinese	Sociology	Fourth-year
Student 9	Female	Chinese	Sociology	Fourth-year
Student 10	Female	Chinese	Sociology	Third-year
Student 11	Female	Chinese	Sociology	Fourth-year
Teacher 1	Female	Chinese	Sociology	3 years
Teacher 2	Female	Chinese	Sociology	12 years
Teacher 3	Female	Chinese	Sociology	15 years

open-ended interview questions were added to explore the banzhuren's role and participant's feelings (McCracken 1988) for all formal interviews for academics and students in the Chinese context. For consistency, interview questions about the banzhuren were broadly the same for teachers and students (e.g. Could you tell me about your interaction with your banzhuren/students? Could you describe what you think the banzhuren role entails?), aside from biographical questions (e.g. Have you been a banzhuren, if so, for how long?). However, there is a limitation in that the 3 teacher participants, despite all being banzhurens, are not the banzhurens of the student participants. Nonetheless, they have been and are still performing the role of banzhuren under the Sociology programme of the university, as colleagues of student participants' banzhuren, constantly subject to institutional regulations and societal expectations. Additionally, common practices (e.g. reading club) are identified in both student and teacher participant's accounts. Therefore, despite individualized pedagogical differences, interviewed banzhurens' accounts could provide insights into the banzhuren's caring practices and banzhuren–student relations in the research setting.

All the interviews were conducted face-to-face in Chinese within the university campus except for one with a senior professor which was conducted online. The interviews were audio-recorded upon gaining informed consent and then transcribed verbatim before being translated into English. Vignettes were encouraged to elicit more detailed responses from the participants by prompting them to recall a story or example. Interviews lasted for one hour on average, and pseudonyms were used throughout the research to protect participants' anonymity.

Data analysis followed the steps of the reflexive thematic approach (Braun and Clarke 2022). First, the researcher was immersed in the data through close reading of the transcripts, noting down initial comments and thoughts. Second, NVivo was employed to highlight certain quotes pertaining to the banzhuren and create initial codes (e.g. dissertation supervisor, studying abroad) alongside them. Third, preliminary lower-order themes were identified by examining the codes and then all these themes were subject to a thorough scrutinization of their relevance to the research question on banzhuren in the fourth step. Finally, overarching themes were generated through comparing, contrasting, and combining lower-order themes (see Table 3).



**Table 3.** Example of codes, lower-order themes and overarching themes.

Codes	Lower-order Themes	Overarching Themes	
Teaching Optional Sociology Courses Teaching Compulsory Sociology Courses	Regular Academic Support as Professor	Academic Support and Instruction	
Mentoring Extra-curricular Projects More Trust in Banzhuren than Other Teachers	Trusting Authoritative Figure in All Academic Pursuit		
Dissertation Supervisor Banzhuren as Safety Net Male banzhuren with More Authority	Exclusive Academic Support by banzhuren		
Reading Club Provided Only by banzhuren			
Shimen Senior Brothers and Sisters Banzhuren as a Parent in this Shimen	Academic Community Built around banzhuren		

## Findings

Three major themes emerged through the analysis of data. The first theme is built around the academic support given by the banzhuren, the second is the non-academic caring and guidance that sets a vision for students and improves their well-being, and the last is the potential inequality created and reproduced through the banzhuren's daily practices in their interaction with the class committee.

### *Academic support and instruction*

First, the banzhuren provides guidance expected from regular teaching staff, consistent with the banzhuren's practices in educational stages prior to higher education (Li and Chen 2013; Zhao 2021). Participants mentioned that their banzhuren teaches various courses, such as Sociology of Politics and Sociology in Rural China (student 5), and Research Methods for Sociology (teacher 1).

Additionally, the banzhuren plays a crucial role in developing students' research capabilities in extra-curricular research opportunities. A prevalent programme in the case study university, the Undergraduate Scientific Research with Funding Project (USRFP), was highlighted by 9 out of 11 student participants. In this initiative, students embark on a research project of their own in small groups, guided by a chosen supervisor. One student recounted seeking advice on a feasible topic from multiple teachers, including her banzhuren.

First, I talked with two lecturers of my previous courses. However, I was still confused after that, so I approached my banzhuren, and he arranged an offline meeting in his office, where he persuaded me to do a topic and became my supervisor for USRFP. (student 6)

While most student participants claimed that they aligned their choice of the supervisor with expertise and the students' interests, the rapport between academics and students remained significant. Student 6 exemplified this, choosing her banzhuren based on daily interactions rather than coursework, as she never took her banzhuren's course. This appears consistent with Ross et al.'s (2014) suggestion of a 'buffer' effect from close teacher–student relationships that alleviate students' confusion and anxiety. Aside from voluntary extra-curricular projects such as the USRFP, the banzhuren is

also prone to assume more responsibilities in compulsory supervision. Students may turn to their banzhuren as a ‘safety net’ and last resort when struggling to find a suitable dissertation supervisor.

He said if you can’t find a supervisor, or you are not interested in any topic, just come to me for help. (student 1)

These findings highlight the banzhuren’s additional responsibilities compared to regular faculty, catering not only to students interested in their research domain but also to those who have faith in their role as a consistently supportive figure. However, it is worth noting that, while the term ‘persuaded’ in the quote implies the authority embodied by the banzhuren, students 1 and 6 both have a male banzhuren, which arguably suggests an intricate link between gender and perceived reliability and trust (Motta and Bennett 2018).

Aside from regular guidance, banzhuren also offers exclusive academic support in the form a reading group aiming to equip first-year students with foundational disciplinary knowledge.

He held a reading club in our freshman year to make everyone experience what this programme is about at the beginning. He asked us to read three books, and he took some of his students, our senior brothers and sisters, to lead us in reading and discussion. I think without this, maybe we would not have the understanding of this programme as we do now. (student 3)

The ‘senior brothers and sisters’ refers to the banzhuren’s masters and doctoral students, embodying a concept where undergraduates are considered the youngest members of a community in the peer-mentoring process (Stigmar 2016). The banzhuren, as the central figure, forms a ‘shimen’ community, where ‘shi’ is a teacher and ‘men’ means door. When new students are admitted by the banzhuren, they are welcomed into the figurative door and embraced by the senior siblings, especially important in the first-year transition (Lane 2020), where the senior mentors coach junior mentees in an informal way for deeper knowledge and understanding (Christie 2014; Lorenzetti et al. 2019). A collective ethos is centred around the banzhuren’s expertise, practices, and traditions, and a sense of continuity and support is reinforced,

Our banzhuren emphasizes the inheritance and tradition of shimen. He introduced his graduate students from the first day and told us they will hold meetings with us, and we can ask them any questions, because they were also brought along this path by their senior siblings. He said don’t be shy, and don’t think you bothered them. (student 7)

While this semi-formal peer-mentoring could serve to enhance junior students’ perseverance in their studies (Strayhorn 2018), and quick adjustment to university (Maunder 2018), the faculty’s role (banzhuren) and its status at the centre of this ‘family’ as a ‘parent’ is seldom stressed in existing literature, highlighting the unique cultural context.

### ***Non-academic support and guidance***

This section will focus on two aspects of the banzhuren practice that may not seem to exert a direct impact on undergraduate learning, but in retrospect could leave long-lasting transformational marks.

### ***Students' future vision***

Regular class meetings organized by the banzhuren serve as pivotal platforms for shaping students' aspirations. These meetings occur at the beginning, intermediate stage, and end of each academic year, when the banzhuren articulates his/her expectations for an ideal class atmosphere and undergraduate image. For example, teacher 2 stated that,

I want to create a good learning atmosphere in my class. I tell them don't compete in involution, you must expand it outwards. Currently, about 7 or 8 students (of 30 students in total) have decided to study abroad, because I always encourage them to. (teacher 2)

The term 'involution', in Chinese 'nei juan', was ranked in the top ten buzzwords for 2020 for its increasingly wide use among the young generations (Yi et al. 2022). It refers to inefficient, irrational yet intense competition for limited resources, such as educational and career opportunities, leading to psychological stress and strained social relationships (Yan et al. 2022). Using this term suggests that the banzhuren is familiar with the youth culture, and she strategically encourages students to study abroad, presenting it as an alternative route to broaden their horizons and alleviate pressures. In line with this, teacher 3 as banzhuren also explicitly advises students to see the world beyond national borders.

I say you must go out and see the bigger world. It's okay to come back after you go out, but you have to go out. (teacher 3)

However, while teacher 3 highlights the merit of studying abroad mainly in terms of an individual's holistic development through experiencing cultures different than one's own, teacher 2 evaluates this for both personal and collective benefits. While she acknowledges that only certain students are able to pursue postgraduate studies overseas, this creates opportunities for some students pursuing the national Master's programme by giving them secured access. The institution gives a quota for the best-achieving students to progress to Master's study without exams. However, when some of them choose to forego this secured route and study abroad, their places will be freed to accommodate other students not originally qualified (teacher 2). Therefore, the banzhuren's deployment of the regulation maximizes outcomes for students in the middle of the performance spectrum, who are neither sufficiently 'bright' to earn a place in the quota, or sufficiently 'rich' to study abroad to avoid national competition. This could be seen as conducive to an inclusive environment, as the banzhuren does not see all students as 'in the same boat' (Lygo-Baker, Kinchin, and Winstone 2019) by actively recognizing students' respective needs, resources and challenges, and maximizing students' chances for potential success within neoliberal higher education (Quinlan 2016).

### ***Caring and emotional support***

Aside from guiding students towards their future development and overall cohort prospects, the interviews unveiled the daily care and faculty–student relationships fostered by the banzhuren, the responsibility of which is both a personal goal and an institutional requirement.

The young undergraduates need a sense of belonging. They have emotional and psychological needs. The class activities are important in bringing them close physically, fostering psychological familiarity and emotional closeness. (teacher 2)

The ‘class activities’ refers to the array of extra-curricular activities for undergraduates, usually organized by the banzhuren and a selected group of students known as the class committee. These can take place at programme level (e.g. group dinner; karaoke) or university level (e.g. sports meeting; military training) with the aim to ‘deepen connections’, aiding students through the transiting process of cutting ties with prior networks (Gravett and Winstone 2022). It is worth noting that although in principle students could opt out, due to the consideration of blending into the community and obeying the banzhuren’s instructions, most of the activities are effectively compulsory (student 8). Therefore, aside from the potential benefits of these activities in strengthening student relations, it raises questions about the voluntary nature of student participation and a patronizing climate of ‘too much’ care (Ecclestone 2012).

Aside from this, teacher 1 mentioned that she is tasked with reminding students to take precautions during national holidays by giving ‘so-called’ safety talks, when the university is no longer accountable for it, although she hinted with her tone and choice of words that she did not think students might actually need this kind of advice. While it might seem patronizing in the way that adult students are treated as minors, it aligns with parents’ expectations for higher education, as suggested below,

Now parents are always the one to be contacted whenever anything happens. (teacher 3)

Arguably there is a social expectation that the banzhuren will take the sole responsibility to look after students and maintain a close connection with parents, flagging up anything worthy of extra attention as a surrogate parent. Further, all teacher participants mentioned the requirement for the banzhuren to hold one-hour individual meetings with students annually, demonstrating the institutional emphasis on close monitoring of students’ academic progress and well-being. This practice parallels the role of personal tutors in Western universities which emphasizes the authentic teacher–student relationship (Gravett and Winstone 2022) where care is demonstrated through the teacher’s interest in the student’s personal affairs with empathy and individualized responses (Dal’Alba, 2009; Walker-Gleaves 2019). Yet the banzhuren’s workloads are significantly heavier, and the role as a banzhuren is a requirement for faculty promotion (teacher 3).

However, it is worth noting that banzhurens used to have more autonomy in building relationships with students ten years ago, if they were not inclined to comply with the institutional regulations imbued with caring.

I held a class meeting to say that don’t come to me if there is anything wrong. They can handle it by themselves as adults. But I had a very good relationship with them because of this. I also told them that I will not contact your parents, and tell you parents don’t call me, I won’t answer. (teacher 3)

Teacher 3 emphasized that a trusting and close faculty–student relationship is based on mutual respect and a lack of constant monitoring and ‘hovering’ over students. Yet she then noted that the banzhuren at present can no longer adopt such ‘loose’ caring due to shifting public perceptions of universities and institutional regulations. However, with ‘tight’ caring practices involving safety talks, teacher 3 perceived current students as atomized, reluctant to communicate with the banzhurens as

friends. This may be attributed to the high-pressure patronizing environment that overwhelms students.

### ***Potential inequality created and reproduced***

The final theme of this research revolves around the class committee in Chinese universities, focusing on how the *banzhuren* mediates the selection of committee members and the possible unequal distribution of educational resources.

The class committee, present at all stages of Chinese education, is a small group typically comprising around five students, including a committee leader (in Chinese ‘*banzhang*’), and members responsible for specific domains, such as commissioner for study (taken by the highest performing student), or commissioner for sports (taken by the most athletic student). During the Covid lockdowns, a commissioner for pandemic control was temporarily created, as an assistant to the committee leader, responsible for checking on if all students have completed the daily PCR test (Student 9). The class committee is comparable to the system of prefect in some parts of the UK school system, with the leader resembling the Head Boy or Head Girl. The *banzhuren* plays a critical role in facilitating and shaping the formation of the committee, particularly in the freshman year, as the quote below suggests,

The most important job in the freshman year is to find a good class committee. I use four steps to select them. The first is to see the materials and portfolios of the students, the second is my first meeting with them at induction, the third is getting to see their dormitory and how clean and organized they are, the fourth is in the first collective meeting, when he introduces himself, and shares his summer life so I get to know him. (teacher 2)

When asked for more illustrations, teacher 2 suggested that while the student’s family background such as parents’ occupations is not the only factor considered, she believed that,

Middle-class students usually tend to be more confident and more competent; you can see that in the induction, their dormitory, and their self-introduction. (teacher 2)

While other teacher participants did not mention if they considered students’ socio-economic status (SES) critical in performing leadership roles, possibly due to the sensitive nature, previous research has produced mixed results regarding the relationship between students’ attainment of leadership roles and their SES. Wu and Bao (2013) identify female, only-child identity, and urban households as positively associated with students’ likelihood of serving as leaders, and SES has no significant impact, while other studies suggest either positive (Cui, Wu, and Erdemir 2022) or negative impact of SES (Zeng, Zeng, and Wu 2024). However, these studies adopted quantitative methods only without particular attention to student leaders at the class level or the role of the teacher. Therefore, it is critical to examine from a qualitative lens how *banzhuren*’s perceptions and assumptions of students from different backgrounds could influence student’s competitiveness in attaining a leadership role. While students’ personal behaviours such as maintaining the dormitory’s tidiness are also considered, drawing on Bourdieu’s (1986) cultural capital theory, these daily practices are closely associated with social classes, thus the selection criteria of the *banzhuren* could still pose a danger in reproducing existing inequalities.

After the class committee is built, the banzhuren regularly delegates various tasks to members with the aim of circulating relevant information and resources among all students.

I asked the class committee to log in to the website of the University's International Exchange Centre frequently, and disseminate information to the whole cohort. (teacher 2)

This quote indicates that the committee's responsibility is to locate and circulate relevant information as a student mentor or advisor, expanding undergraduates' opportunities. Additionally, the committee's responsibilities also include updating the banzhuren on potential problems other students might encounter (teacher 3, student 8). This is similar to Terrion and Leonard's (2007) taxonomy that classifies the functions of student mentors as task-related and psychological, as committee members aim to complete the delegated tasks of searching for specific information while also paying attention to students' psychological well-being. However, aside from all the facilitation and scaffolding provided by the committee, the committee members are rewarded with a slight bonus to their transcript (student 8), and are provided with the privilege of direct communication with faculty, which arguably is a form of social capital that could transform into cultural capitals (Tavares et al. 2015). Student 9 gave an example of this, recalling an observed bias in teachers' selection of teaching assistants, favouring candidates with prior connections with faculty such as committee leaders. Students taking such roles benefited from exposure to high-profile events and improved organizational and synthesis skills.

There was a Sociology conference in which the principal, dean of the department, and other institutional leaders participated. As an assistant, I took conference notes and composed a news article with the instruction of a teacher. I learnt a lot from it, as I wouldn't normally have access to these people's perspectives, and I improved my ability of organizing and synthesizing information. (student 9)

This resonates with Seery et al.'s (2021) statement that student mentors, in this case committee members, could enjoy privileged access to different forms of capital, entrenching the gap between them and regular students, and reproducing existing social inequalities (Bourdieu 1986).

In summary, the class committee serves as a mediator between the banzhuren and students, fostering student engagement and collaboration. However, the potential instrumental value of close contact with the banzhuren may contribute to the perpetuation of privilege enjoyed by certain advantaged students, providing them with a 'fast track' to valuable resources.

## Discussion

This research aims to discuss banzhuren's role and responsibility in nurturing undergraduates' development in Chinese universities as a caring figure. The findings show that the banzhuren is a hybrid position acting as a professor and also a hovering 'helicopter parent', perceived by students as an authority figure and a safety net like no other staff.

Through examining participants' perceptions of the banzhuren, this research corroborates the importance of relational pedagogies endorsed in previous studies (Bovill 2020; Gravett, Taylor, and Fairchild 2021; Walker-Gleaves 2019), highlighting the role of

evolving relational dynamics between the banzhuren and students in responding to students' needs in their academic and generic endeavours. Despite being a unique cultural role, caring provided by the banzhuren bears similarities to caring of regular teachers in higher education of other contexts, empowering students in academic, relational and holistic development (Tang, Walker-Gleaves, and Rattray 2021). Further, participant's accounts of seeing the banzhuren as a safety net have substantiated the 'buffer' effects of a trusting teacher–student relationship (Ross et al. 2014), and the reported benefits of collective activities and banzhuren's personal supervision are consistent with previous research in terms of student's enhanced engagement and well-being (Chika-James 2020). The banzhuren's attentive care for students' personal lives is aligned with the principle of relational pedagogies that authenticity is key to building mutual respect and meaningful relationships (Dall'Alba 2009; Gravett and Winstone 2022; Walker-Gleaves 2019). Additionally, the research findings parallel with relational pedagogies in terms of rejecting neoliberalism ideology, as the banzhuren's daily work includes recognizing student's personal needs, instead of viewing them as a homogenous collective (Lygo-Baker, Kinchin, and Winstone 2019; Quinlan 2016).

Beyond corroborating the merits of relational pedagogies, this research also unveils that the banzhuren's overwhelming care could produce a patronizing climate of higher education potentially infantilizing undergraduates and depriving them of autonomy and independence (Ecclestone 2012). Moreover, the extensive range of the banzhuren's work breaks down the boundary of traditional labour divisions and raises questions about faculty satisfaction, burnout and the distribution of caring responsibility to different populations of faculty (Motta and Bennett 2018). Interviews with the three female banzhurens demonstrate the extensive time and effort devoted to caring for students in various aspects, echoing previous research on feminized notions of caring (Mariskind 2014; Tronto 1993), necessitating further research that explores the male banzhuren's practices to supplement student's accounts for a more holistic and critical understanding of the caring figure.

Aside from the banzhuren–student dimension, this research also substantiates the merits of relational pedagogies from the aspect of peer relationships. Two types of peer relationships emerged in the interviews, one with senior masters and doctoral students, and the other with peers in the class committee. Findings for both attest to the importance of constructing peer relations, as academic and emotional support are provided to younger and less experienced students, enhancing their belonging, perseverance, knowledge of specific disciplines, etc. (Gravett, Taylor, and Fairchild 2021; Stigmar 2016; Terrion and Leonard 2007) and building a solid foundation for their first-year transition (Lane 2020). However, contrary to Maunder's (2018) research, participants did not report overreliance on senior peers or the danger of exposing themselves to vulnerability. This might be explained by the 'shimen' community distinct to the Chinese context, where students of different ages are united around the banzhuren who encourages peer-mentoring, mediates peer relationships, and performs a role with more authority than any student. This suggests that while peer relationship plays a critical role in relational pedagogies, it may not be separated from its constant entanglement with teachers and teacher–student dynamics in educational settings.

The banzhuren's role in shaping peer relationships, especially the construction of class committees, also highlights the potential inequality between selected students and others'



access to resources, corroborating with Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital. While the impact of students' family background on their prospects as leaders (Wu and Bao 2013; Zeng, Zeng, and Wu 2024) and the power dynamics in peer-mentoring (Seery et al. 2021) have been explored previously, the teacher's role remains unclear. This research highlights that teachers' perceptions of middle-class manners of speech and behaviour could be positively associated with students' attainment of leadership roles and further access to exclusive opportunities, thus entrenching the imbalanced distribution of power among students of different backgrounds. It unveils the hidden side of banzhuren's role as a caring and supportive figure, which I suggest could present a challenge to the theory of relational pedagogy and its perceived benefits. With the implicit and unspoken curriculum of expected behaviour in place, care is arguably not evenly distributed, posing a risk of marginalizing and silencing certain voices.

## Conclusion

This research contributes to providing new insights into caring and teacher–student relationships in higher education in a specific context and beyond, while questioning the seemingly benign notion of caring. Firstly, it addresses the gap of the banzhuren's practices in Chinese higher education, as most studies are dedicated to its implications in compulsory education contexts (Gu, Chen, and Li 2015; Zhao 2021). Exploring the banzhuren's beliefs and practices is of particular importance in understanding students' navigation through university life, as the banzhuren serves as both a gatekeeper to disciplinary learning as students embark on in their first years, as well as a constant helper who aids them in the transition through university, and into further studies or employment. This research into the banzhuren's practices and impacts adds to the understanding of what an undergraduate life entails in China, in terms of how the banzhuren–student relationship that has not been examined before plays a role in promoting students' academic and generic development.

Aside from this, the research also highlights the situatedness and distinctiveness of the banzhuren in their constant interaction with institutional and wider socio-cultural environments that cannot be fully comprehended by literature embedded in Western contexts. For example, the banzhuren's strategies to encourage students to study abroad are tied up with the rationale to provide more opportunities to the whole cohort, under the intense national competition to gain access to master's study in China. What may be seen as a probing of private topics and invasion of privacy in other cultures, such as inquiring about student's holiday plans and conducting safety checks, could be seen as normalized or even desirable in China. Further, specific practices are also intricately linked with the case universities' reputation and the demographics of the student population.

This research is limited in certain aspects. Given the small sample size and the fact that all teacher participants are female, this research is limited in the generalisability of its findings, which cannot be seen to represent undergraduates or banzhurens in wider contexts. Additionally, as the role of the banzhuren was an emerging finding from a larger project, banzhurens of the specific student participants were not recruited, therefore future research could explore perspectives of students and their assigned banzhurens for a more holistic picture. Nonetheless, while the title of this paper brings out the pedagogies of care adopted by the banzhuren, the findings challenge the seemingly

straightforwardly benign nature of caring, uncovering the ambivalent nature of caring distribution and responsibilities. This paper proposes that care in higher education should be examined within a critical lens rather than taken as an unproblematic supplementary practice to daily teaching and research, as it can pose a risk of infantilizing students and is not always separate from the reproduction of inequality. In this way, investigating the critical role of the *banzhuren* in Chinese higher education and unveiling its public and hidden practices and the multifaceted *banzhuren*–student relationship is valuable beyond its contribution to the Chinese context. It raises questions, enables reflections and provides new perspectives regarding the role of care and student autonomy, the distribution and enactment of care, and the constantly evolving nature of higher education and undergraduate education within wider social and cultural expectations.

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