

Guest Post – How China's New Policy May Change Researchers' Publishing Behavior

By SCHOLARLY KITCHEN | MAR 3, 2020

AUTHORITY | AUTHORS | BUSINESS MODELS | RESEARCH | SOCIAL ROLE

Editor's Note: Today's post is by Dr. Jie Xu, a professor at the School of Information Management, Wuhan University of China. She is also a Senior Academic Associate of CIBER Research Ltd. Her research interests are scholarly communication and information behavior. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, Jie has not been able to return to her school (which sits in the heart of Wuhan) for nearly two months. In that time she has become accustomed to teaching online in a virtual classroom.

Last week, [China's Ministry of Science and Technology and Ministry of Education announced two policy documents](https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2020/02/27/new-chinese-policy-could-reshape-global-stm-publishing/) (<https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2020/02/27/new-chinese-policy-could-reshape-global-stm-publishing/>), which triggered wide discussion among researchers across the country. According to these documents, the Journal Impact Factor (JIF) and Science Citation Index (SCI) should not be used as the most important criteria when recruiting and promoting personnel. Universities and research institutes are not allowed to provide monetary incentives for publishing in SCI-indexed journals. SCI-related metrics are prohibited from being used for university or discipline rankings.



Chinese researchers were not surprised at the release of the new policies. The year 2016 marked the beginning of a series of reforms in China around research evaluation. In that year, President Xi Jinping announced a reform of the personnel system in universities and research institutions during the 29th Meeting of the Central Leading Team for Comprehensively Deepening Reform. He said that evaluation of professional titles should not be based on publications only (http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-11/01/content_5127202.htm). Since then, a series of new policy documents on metric-driven scholarly systems were released. Government at all levels, universities, institutions, and public funders have made great efforts to reverse the ‘SCI-supremacy’ phenomenon which has been intensively criticized for its negative influence on boosting inferior quality paper production, making researchers slaves of metrics, and leading to research misconduct in the past two decades.

2016 also marked a milestone when China’s total number of researchers and scholarly articles published surpassed that of the USA, making it the largest source of published research in the world (<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-00927-4>). And in 2017, the total citation of papers authored by Chinese researchers ranked second in the world. China is ahead of the schedule set by the “Guidelines for the Middle- and Long-Term National Science and Technology Development Program (2006-2020)” (http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2006-02/09/content_183787.htm). In this program, a goal was set for China to rank as one of the top five most-cited countries. With these goals achieved, new strategies needed to be put in place for further progress.

In 2018, a movement against papers, titles, education, and awards supremacy (http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2018-07/03/content_5303251.htm) was jointly launched by Ministry of Education, Ministry of Science and Technology, Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, Chinese Academy of Science, and Chinese Academy of Engineering. Individual universities and national research institutions started to make action plans as the policy document provided no details on implementation. “My university stopped providing financial incentives for publishing in SCI-indexed journals since early 2019.” “‘Fewer but better’ is the new rule of publishing in our field,” commented Chinese researchers on social media. An R&D policy maker from a prestigious research university in China posted, “In my university, a new ‘white list’ of journals is under discussion. More Chinese journals will be taken in. SCI/SSCI indexing and citation will be less weighted while peer review and word of mouth factors will be considered.”

The two latest policy documents are not new to Chinese researchers, but they contain more operational and detailed instructions for implementation than existing guidelines have offered. For instance, one of the documents advocates multiple appraisal criteria for different researchers. Applied research should focus on the actual contribution of the research in real life, not on the number of papers published by the researcher. In theoretical fields without immediate applications, scientists only need to produce “at most five representative works to prove their worth, and at least a third of their papers must be published in Chinese journals, if they want to apply for national level funding or awards”. As a quick response to the new representative works policy, National Natural Science Foundation of China changed its application rules for the annual Innovative Group Research Project and Foundation for Distinguished Young Scientists in 2020. Applicants are no longer required to list their indexed publications with citation scores when submitting proposals. “I’m super happy that we don’t have to fill in the annoying form, such a relief,” a candidate says.

The new policies will bring big changes, but individual researchers may have different reactions. For unestablished early career researchers lacking networks to disseminate research results, SCI-indexed journals are still an ideal publishing outlet because they are relatively fair and transparent. “We all know it is not perfect, and no metrics are perfect in practice. But at least it is fair and workable,” a bibliometric scientist says. For early career researchers, JIF is an objective and reliable indicator, on which they can compete with senior and tenured professors who are experienced in publishing and have wide connections in the field. According to the guidelines, scientists are encouraged to publish works in leading international journals such as *Nature*, *Science* and *Cell*, but it is very difficult for young scientists to publish in them. So less influential journals in the SCI index will still be taken into consideration. “Publishing in domestic Chinese language journals can be difficult, too,” an early career researcher explains, “Esteemed domestic journals have even higher rejection rates and longer waiting times to publish.”

PhD students’ publishing burden will be reduced because the new policies prohibit universities from requiring students to publish their research as a condition for receiving their degrees.

For senior and tenured professors, the implementation of new policies will free them from the publish-or-perish dilemma. Since quality outweighs quantity, they will be able to put more effort in high quality research which usually needs more time to yield innovative results. Senior researchers may lose some interest in publishing with less influential SCI journals, but will still strive for the top outlets and international journals published in China. Disregarding the IF and SCI/SSCI-oriented evaluation system may encourage them to disseminate research results through diverse channels in multiple ways. For example, valuable data as a research output can be published and recognized. Newly launched open access journals and academic social media can be used as alternative outlets to widely disseminate works. Senior researchers, compared to their early career peers, are more likely to get funding to cover the article processing charges (APCs), so they are more likely to try journals with a gold open access model.

Disciplinary differences can be seen too. Compared to the hard sciences, social sciences and humanities have fewer international linkages and networks, and English is not the *lingua franca* as it is in natural sciences. A new appraisal system which encourages publishing papers in Chinese academic journals is generally welcomed by researchers from the social sciences and humanities. As a social scientist says, “it is a favorable policy, especially for our social science. It disregards English journal-based metrics and suggests qualitative evaluation methods, such as peer review and social influence. In our field, domestic policy makers and the public are the groups that we want to influence most.” Applied science researchers also like the new movement, because they have struggled under the dominance of the SCI and JIF system as well. They recognize the new policy as a healthy development for China’s science and research. A clinician says, “I support these new policies, because they give us a bigger chance to be promoted. I cannot publish papers when I have to do two operations a day. I don’t have the time and energy to write them.”

There is no doubt that the newly released policies, the new appraisal system and new requirements for increased publication in Chinese journals will influence Chinese researchers' publishing behavior, and that the new sets of rules have the potential to change the landscape of China's scientific research, as well as international scholarly communication. For international publishers, these new policies present both opportunities and challenges.

If the policy is fully implemented by universities and institutes, Chinese researchers' demand for publishing papers in low-quality journals will rapidly decrease. Journals which have gamed metrics for getting indexed or more citations will be disregarded, since the journal's reputation and word of mouth will be more important for Chinese researchers when making publishing decisions. Predatory journals will lose their market in China, because publishing in blacklisted journals will be severely punished. Reputable and top-ranked international journals are still the best choice which will be pursued by experienced senior researchers and the competition for publishing in such journals will become fiercer.

According to the new policies, appraisal systems should focus on the originality and scientific value of the research papers. It is exactly what the peer review process does in the journal publishing workflow. For aspiring academic publishers, either Chinese or international, providing good quality peer review services is always the best strategy for surviving and developing. The new policies encourage researchers to publish or present their most important works in domestic Chinese journals with international influence and top academic conferences. This provides new market development opportunities for international publishers, collaborating with Chinese partners to publish international journals with a bigger influence. Opportunities also exist to provide professional services to Chinese universities and institutions, for example, publishing international conference proceedings, language editing, and helping Chinese authors to translate and promote works into the international market.

China is an essential part of the global research community and Chinese researchers are more and more engaged in international scientific research. Development of a healthy academic appraisal system in China will benefit the whole international academic communication ecosystem and could reshape global STM publishing.



Scholarly Kitchen

@SCHOLARLYKITCHN

Posts by guest authors or group posts written by multiple Scholarly Kitchen Chefs are grouped together under the Scholarly Kitchen byline.

Discussion

14 THOUGHTS ON "GUEST POST – HOW CHINA'S NEW POLICY MAY CHANGE RESEARCHERS' PUBLISHING BEHAVIOR"



Dear Jie, great post! thanks a lot for your detailed contribution, which provides some very valuable insights into the ‘daily life’ of many of your colleague researchers in China, STM or not doesn’t really matter here. I do agree with you that for many researchers in China, like e.g. the early career academics, life may become a bit more fair and less influenced by the IF obsession, when selecting a publishing outlet. I firmly believe that the competition for all those (STM-)researchers in and from China who want to meet the level of their international (top) peers will remain fierce, like it is true for all researchers everywhere on this globe. At least for STM, and like Michael Mabe is correctly stating in his comment to Ms Tao Tao’s post of yesterday here at TSK, we are talking a true international eco-system. Publishing in Chinese Journals, maybe even in the Chinese language, will – to my taste – therefore no do the trick. So let us hope that the best academic works in STM & HSS from China will continue to find their way to their respective international communities, to ensure the greatest exposure and dissemination! The latter is exactly what academic research is all about and what the international publishers are good in to facilitate, some of them for hundreds of years already! best Matthias Wahls, the Netherlands

By MATTHIAS WAHLS | MAR 3, 2020, 7:51 AM



Dear Matthias, thanks a lot for comments. I agree with you that scholarly publishing is an international by its nature. These policies are not against SCI or IF , they are against SCI-supremacy.

By JIE XU | MAR 3, 2020, 11:01 AM



Dear Jie,

One of the new directives lists high quality conferences as an improved form of dissemination of research.

Do you know what is being recommended==conference presentation or publication in conference proceedings or both? And how is the quality of this conference or proceedings to be measured?

By MARY SUMMERFIELD | MAR 3, 2020, 11:47 AM



Both conference presentation and publication in proceedings count, but there are no details on how the quality will be measured. The academic committees of individual institutions will make the decisions.

By TAO TAO | MAR 3, 2020, 2:30 PM



High quality conferences are one of three types of dissemination of research that is Approved (not improved)!

Do the directives state that the academic committees will define the high quality conferences—or did that information come out later?

By MARY SUMMERFIELD | MAR 3, 2020, 4:46 PM



It didn't say there will be further documents. I think the academic committees of individual universities or institutions will make their lists for conference. This is in dispute, people thought it may not workable or lead more problems such as corruption.

By JIE XU | MAR 3, 2020, 6:58 PM



Excellent article. We have tried to impress on all prospective authors the importance of sending their manuscripts to high-quality journals that have a scope of interest that includes the focus of their work. Too many times I see articles that are respectable and reflect a great effort by the authors but are completely outside the scope of our journal. The work must match the stated interest areas to be relevant for the target audience. The changes that “Applied research should focus on the actual contribution of the research in real life, not on the number of papers published by the researcher” would also serve many American investigators who perform clinical diagnostics work in medical laboratories. They are not MDs but are not basic science researchers. Thank you for this progressive example!

By BARBARA ZEHNBAUER | MAR 4, 2020, 6:16 PM



Thank you Barbara. Most of researchers as far as I can see in Chinese social media showed their positive attitude to the new policies. Chinese scientists did a lot of research on Covid-19 pandemic, many of them are published open and applied for clinical treatment. I’m so glad to see they are not in behind pay-wall or only with those high IF journals.

By JIE XU | MAR 4, 2020, 6:31 PM



Hello Jie, thank you so much for your thorough interpretations and comments on the two Chinese policies. The two Chinese policies enlighten us to rethink the purpose why scholars would publish their research work, which should be for registration, validation, distribution and archive, rather than for citations solely. I also totally agree with your point that “journals which have gamed metrics for getting indexed or more citations will be disregarded, since the journal’s reputation and word of mouth will be more important for Chinese researchers when making publishing decisions”. I think it is the journals’ holy and ethical duty to help their published articles to increase both the local and international visibilities and influence as widely as possible.

By CHARLEY MIAO | MAR 5, 2020, 6:56 PM



dear Charley, nice meeting you here online! I'd like to add to your comment that any scholar, Chinese as well as their international peers, has in common that their first and foremost motivation to undertake research and to publish the results is to gain international visibility & reputation, in the end this works through citations. Those most ambitious academics strive for the highest grants, the best professorships at the best Universities, to let them race for the most respected awards in the end. The absolute top award being assigned in Norway each year! This system is often seen as harsh and unfair to many, and I acknowledge that. Nevertheless, there is no alternative to it, as it currently stands. Policies to change the publication behavior of scientists, like these new ones in China, or like the O.A. mandates in Europe from the recent past, will hardly influence the preferences of top researchers with respect to their preferred choice of journal. Just realize, we are discussing here their absolute best papers, of which they are very proud of! Any such (mandating) policy will only de-link the policy-makers / funders from the scholars, they intend to serve. Whatever metric s/o would apply, SCI/IF or sth. else not matters! No funder will be able to make the known top-journals to be less top under any other metric or policy. And as policies do not create new top journals, funders and other policy makers should better enable their own customers (their scholars) to publish in the journal of their 1st choice. International Academic Journal Publishing is a profession. The most established publishers in Europe are still serving their international markets, like they did in the past under the traditional (subscription) model as well as actually under O.A. No E.U. Open access policy has been able to change their ultimate interests and goals, and so it will most likely happen with these (Chinese) new policies. Just allow me to compare with international soccer: The best players all strive to play for the top teams in England, Spain, Germany, and Italy, and they all dream to lift the European Cup once in their life! And so it is with the Academic Scholars. Publishing in Science & Nature, and once being awarded in Norway is what counts most. It is as easy as that, so keep it as simple as possible! The academic communities would thank all involved for that!

best wishes, Matthias Wahls, The Netherlands.

By MATTHIAS WAHLS | MAR 9, 2020, 11:12 AM



Yes, the motivation where for authors to publish their best papers could not be pressed down. There are quite a lot of discussions on what matters more for academics: journal prestige or readership (e.g., For academics, what matters more: journal prestige or readership? <https://www.sciencemag.org/careers/2019/07/academics-what-matters-more-journal-prestige-or-readership>)? It does not seem to have a definite answer, and I guess they might essentially be the same: journal prestige = journal readership. In fact, the two policies that this post discussed over do not conflict with journal prestige but “warn” Chinese authors not to publish on journals without prestige. Then comes a question: what is a prestigious journal? I think journal readership really matters.

By CHARLEY MIAO | MAR 9, 2020, 8:44 PM



Yes Charley, I think the current scholarly communication system does not serve the needs of science and society well. If you look at the scientific publications about Covid-19 , some of them (the very early and important ones) are still behind the paywall.

By JIE XU | MAR 6, 2020, 4:14 AM



Yes, I agree with you, but the situation has been changed gradually. On one hand, many China-based English-language journals are published or co-published by international publishers with board exposure and visibility worldwide. On the other hand, the biggest obstacle for Chinese-language journals, more than 6,000 in Mainland China, to have international visibility is its language barriers. However, the situation is also being changed positively. Many Chinese-language journals encourage their authors to write longer English abstracts; there is even a large-scale bilingual journal project sponsored by CNKI (<http://tp.cnki.net/>) and a national-wide project called F5000 sponsored by ISTIC (<http://f5000.istic.ac.cn/>). Some responsible local journal aggregators have opened their paywall on 2019-nCoV-related papers for quick and broad international dissemination. TrendMD (www.trendmd.com; a cross-publisher distribution platform) launches a free campaign to send the links of selected articles about 2019-nCoV from different China-based journals to the websites of related articles of many well-known international journals, solely for the purpose of promptly increasing article visibility and usage.

By CHARLEY MIAO | MAR 6, 2020, 10:41 AM



I think the core of the two Chinese official documents is to reduce the number of low-quality journals, both local and international, from the author's end, to encourage the dissemination of knowledge and science advances through high-quality conferences and timely exchanges, and to attach importance of the theory to its combination with practice, thus putting forward higher requirements for journals, that is, how to facilitate readers to quickly access to related articles published by fewer high-quality journals. This is really worthy of wide-range discussion.

By CHARLEY MIAO | MAR 10, 2020, 3:33 AM



The mission of the Society for Scholarly Publishing (SSP) is to advance scholarly publishing and communication, and the professional development of its members through education, collaboration, and networking. SSP established The Scholarly Kitchen blog in February 2008 to keep SSP members and interested parties aware of new developments in publishing.

The Scholarly Kitchen is a moderated and independent blog. Opinions on The Scholarly Kitchen are those of the authors. They are not necessarily those held by the Society for Scholarly Publishing nor by their respective employers.