

# Inconsistencies between journal policies and editors in China

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## Abstract

This study has cooperated with the Chinese administrative supervisor and representative editors to tackle the inconsistencies shown through the interactions between the governmental side (i.e. the investigator) and the editorial side (i.e. the respondents). The analysis of the questionnaire and interview materials obtained from the government-funded survey project addressed the two-sided problem: what is the mechanism involved between the editors' roles and the policy environment in the Chinese academic publishing system? The study aims to understand the relationship between the editors and Chinese academic publishing processes. To address this problem, this paper draws on neutral party field research to observe the intentions of different parties involved when managing and participating in this project. The data of the project was represented in a neutral manner, where editorial feedback, political considerations, and other participation responses were collected and analyzed. These valuable secondary data helped to find the key inconsistencies between the role of the editor and the academic system and its policy system. Our findings highlighted that financial, professional, and procedural problems are the inconsistencies that were largely shaped by exchange (cultural and political) capital, working values, and the playing rules within the Chinese publishing field. The field research therefore prioritizes social interests (i.e. social capital) over economic benefits. Based on our observation in the study, we suggest the construction of a resource exchange model that delineates Chinese academic publishing efficiency. This proposed model emphasizes its cultural and political intervention within the Chinese academic publishing industry.

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## Introduction

Since the Second World War, academic publishing has undergone significant transformations, evolving into a complex and dynamic ecosystem primarily driven by business interests and profitability. Over the twentieth century, the scholarly community and higher education management system experienced a gradual infiltration of business motives, facilitated by advancements in digital technologies. On the one hand, foreign academic publications were more business-focused. In contrast, Chinese academic publications appear to solely based itself with business market reports, which depend more on cultural capital and political capital. These distinct characteristics in the Chinese academic industry reveal the necessity to investigate the knowledge- and resource-exchanged model that we tried to propose for the study.

To propose the resource-exchanged model, it is important to discuss the Chinese economy and its unique publishing characteristics, and the Chinese publishing industry with the idea of the Chinese government<sup>[1]</sup>. According to Statistical Data of Chinese S&T Papers (2023)<sup>[2]</sup> published by the Institute of Scientific and Technical Information of China in 2022, China has achieved a preeminent global position by contributing 16,349 articles across disciplines in the most influential academic journals, accounting 30.3% of the worldwide aggregate and securing the top position in the academic global rankings. Xie & Freeman's research<sup>[3]</sup> suggest that the Chinese contributions to the global scientific publication account for 36% when considering articles authored by Chinese researchers at non-Chinese addresses, alongside China-addressed articles in the Scopus database, and the articles written in Chinese language journals not in the Scopus database. These converging findings underscore the substantial academic production of China and its formidable presence within the expansive academic publishing market.

China boasts a lucrative publishing market, yet only a select few international private investors have ventured into this domain. According to The Blue Book of China's Academic Journal Development<sup>[4]</sup>, there is a total number of 4,963 science, technology, and medical journals (STM) published in China at the end of 2020. Despite the enormous amount of publication numbers, there are only 375 (7.6%) journals published in English. Roughly half of English papers published in China at the end of 2020 are jointly published by Chinese institutes along with foreign publishers, of which Springer Nature has the largest share, followed by Elsevier and Wiley<sup>[5]</sup>. This phenomenon is often ascribed to China's stringent government licensing system and a distinctive funding model that seemingly prioritizes quantity over the quality of research<sup>[6]</sup>. Some argue that cultural and governmental factors, such as spiritual incentives and the discourse on professional value as perceived by academic editors, are given undue weight in this discussion.

To clarify the authors' position, this paper explicitly does not prioritize international visibility as a primary factor in analyzing the challenges faced by China's relatively underperforming international publishing sector. While this stance may appear to deviate from the values of promoting open science on a broader scale, it reflects a commitment to adopting a neutral and reflective approach. The objective is to reassess and delineate a more rational and nuanced landscape of academic publishing in China. It is futile to only criticize China's self-closeness and unethical academic issues, such as plagiarism, fake peer review, academic dishonesty, and ghost-written papers, encouraging scholars to publish articles with a 'save time' or 'save effort' mindset<sup>[7]</sup>. Alternatively, the role of the editors will be examined and evaluated within the context of the Chinese academic publishing industry. The central argument for this paper is to take China itself as a self-thriving industry because there is the necessity of aiming to untangle the connections and relations

between the government and the editors (as the dominant players) to introduce the knowledge- and resources-exchanged model (i.e. Chinese publication system involved with cultural and political capitals). Lastly, the conclusion of the paper will summarize the reasons and implications of the inconsistencies between the practice (i.e. editors' role) and policy (i.e. governmental policies) within the Chinese academic publishing system.

## Methods and materials

This research is informed by a government-funded survey conducted in 2022, with the objective of providing policy recommendations to enhance the quality of publications in Chinese academic journals across various disciplines. This government-funded project is initiated under the national calling for greater technological innovation and broader national visibility. The project is ultimately trying to provide national academic intelligence and communication support by putting more focus and effort into journal publishing.

In revisiting the research progress of our government-funded project, a questionnaire was crafted in December 2022, covering essential facets of the editorial process, academic communication strategies, financial conditions, governmental support, and personal insights—integral aspects for comprehending the Chinese academic publishing system. We targeted 266 editorial offices, chosen for their representation, with a majority listed in the Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) and the Implementation Plan 2019–2023 of The Action Plan for Excellence in Chinese Sci-Tech Journals. Given that not all the journal offices responded to our research requests and we successfully gathered 259 completed forms from the aforementioned research sample. Those samples were not exactly selected based on the mentioned two criteria, but ultimately decided by the funder represented by the governmental side. Importantly, the impact factor of Chinese journals isn't solely shaped by academic assessment institutions but is influenced by governmental intervention. The recognition from governmental sectors could also affect journals' reputation and influence factors.

The main focus of the project's methodology is to critically identify and elaborate on the problems produced by Chinese journal publications. When conducting the project, this focus is deeply embedded in the design of the methodology. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to delve into the profound insights gained by Chinese editors-in-chief through their personal experiences. Thirty seven editors-in-chief were organized in groups based on participants' topics of interest. All interviewees were fully aware that their participation in this research would receive backing from the policy-maker, which may reshape their career and working environment to some extent. An interview framework was created in the following format, after knowing the objectives of the interview: a set of open-ended questions, which cover four main areas of journal assessment improvement: 1) the quality of academic community service; 2) constructing the Chinese academic discourses; 3) the journal operation system; and 4) the international visibility for Chinese journals. Those selected topics have been considered as critical areas that may deeply affect Chinese academic publishing development through piloting literature review.

However, in adopting a meta-analysis perspective to scrutinize the progression of this funded project, a compelling theme surfaces—one that delves into the intentions of governmental funders and editors, and the exchange of their ideas within the framework of a governmental research initiative. The methodology adopted will reveal the intentions of the governmental funders and editors, and their way to continuously exchange ideas in a governmental research project. The collected data helped to develop the

storyline of the Chinese journal publishing landscape in two-way conversations (the editor's side and the government's side). The one-year journey of conducting the questionnaire and interview provided a natural environment to observe, interact, and understand the participants' responses and the adjustment of the funders. Since there are problems arise from the unexpected findings after conducting questionnaires and interviews, field research is thus a more appropriate tool to answer the open-ended research questions than those used to further knowledge in mature areas of the literature<sup>[8,9]</sup>. Therefore, field research was introduced as the key method to observe and discuss the landscape of Chinese publishing through a neutral lens that bridges the governmental side and the editorial side.

Through moderating this governmental project, the collected opinions and ideas from the objects were conveyed to further representation of the governmental side. The reviews and feedback were received for the later detailed adjustment to apply it to the survey strategies from 2022 to 2023 based on the journal publishing system. It is important to always retrieve back to the original goal of this governmental project is to provide advice on policymaking of Chinese journal publishing ecology. Since the authors' role in the governmental project is to take the neutral ground between the two sides. As an insider of the governmental project and an outsider of the Chinese publishing field, the experience of conducting this governmental project is feasible to observe the intentions of governors and editors through their sustained communication and thematic discussions followed with a centered research goal.

## Results and findings

The regulatory system, while not serving as a fully effective administrative framework, does not accurately represent the practical conditions of Chinese journal publishing. Conversely, hidden within the system are systematic rules and roles that actively influence the entire journal publishing landscape in China. As the survey aims to enhance the quality of Chinese journal publishing through systemic adjustments, the survey outcomes predominantly revolve around identifying problems and proposing countermeasures. Specifically, three prominent issues have garnered attention from various intellectuals:

### Financial problems

Referring to journals that are not financially independent and the journals have to lean more on the financial support from their competent authority. As the public department affiliated with universities or research institutions, the institutional attribute largely restricts their right to financial independence. For example, the top three sources of income for research were mentioned in the questionnaire, and questions such as 'What are the journal's main income resources?' have been formed. The main income resources for the journals are funds from the state, competent authorities, or related projects; service fees of distribution; and article processing charges (see Fig. 1). While for the question 'Does your journal's income increase for the past five years?' it is shown in xyz that only 42.47% of the journals' revenue has made growth within the past 5 years, and more than half of the journals do not have any revenue growth during the same period. It is undeniable that academic capitalism<sup>[10]</sup> is changing the scholarly publishing industries to a certain degree. However, its impact on different countries may vary depending on their administrative publishing system and the extent of the academic capitalism within the system. There is an unusual phenomenon shown in China where academic capitalism has been largely hindered as administrative power has intervened in the Chinese publishing industry. It is expected that over 60% of 259 journals among the sample are positioned as the secondary unit of

public sector organizations (see Fig. 2). This result reveals that over 60% of so-called 'leading' journals by the governmental side are boosted up with the intervene of competent authorities.

To explain this phenomenon, a crucial factor to consider how journals can be placed into different sectors and catalogized in the first place. As a public organization, they do not only have to rely on the parent agency for funding salaries and basic operational expenses but also often have to make up the shortfall by running profit-making operations<sup>[11]</sup>. There is a noticeable limitation on financial-related topics when journals are involved. Furthermore, some journals cannot even freely use the profits made on their own, as one interviewee commented as a secondary unit of public organization. This was concluded from the questionnaire: 'Some profitable journals have to help the other journals facing budget deficits, given that they are not financially autonomous'. Therefore, journals are largely restricted in their distribution of financial gains from the previously allocated budgets. Chinese journals have prominent issues with their finances and operational expenses, which indirectly reduces efficiency in journal publishing, quantity, and quality. Thus, the journals' supervising public organization has to manage the financial problems to get more support both from the financial and administrative institutions.

### Professional problems

Referring to editors' presumed behavior and their roles in the scholarly publishing industry. This problem is also shown as one of the results of China's institutional ranking and categories. On the one hand, according to one estimation, funding to service organizations constitutes more than 30% of total government expenditure, of which 70% is devoted to personnel<sup>[12]</sup>. Journal personnel expenditure relies on the distribution controlled by its sponsoring public organization, which can be deduced by its current personnel condition. For instance, Andonovski et al. claim that the peer review system's primary issue is the unequal allocation of peer review

invitations, while the secondary concern pertains to recognizing the efforts of the reviewers<sup>[13]</sup>. In this case, editors' academic efforts have been ignored with a higher assessment status reserved for the reviewers, leading to lower demand in the number of editors for a journal. To further prove this, the result of the questionnaires from this study shows the total number of editors is generally maintained within 15, mainly in the range of 3–10 employees. Especially for the journals as the secondary unit of public organizations, the number of employees is limited in the range of 1–10. As the number of editors has been restricted, there is a high likelihood that editors' professional role in scholarly publishing industry is an already limited position. Another survey conducted by McNair et al.<sup>[14]</sup> in 2019 is equally insightful to the professional problems that the editors hold. Among 1,203 academics in 10 different countries, including Germany, the Netherlands, the UK, Japan, China, and Hong Kong, just to name a few, the survey concludes that the average number of accepted peer review tasks per month is 3.5. Germany has the lowest acceptance rate which is 2.7, while the highest is in China and Hong Kong with an average number of 4.9<sup>[13]</sup>. Thus, the acknowledgment and recognition of editors' role within the academic peer review system is still low. Although the result from McNair et al.'s study shows that China has a high acceptance rate of editors, there are still several systematic problems underneath this iceberg.

Another professional problem can be disclosed by the data analysis study conducted by Nishikawa-Pacher et al.<sup>[15]</sup>, who researched the number of journals and editors pertaining to 26 publishers, an average of 81 editors and a median of 34 editors per journal was found based on the basic information from 352 journals from 26 publishers (including five predatory publishers). This largely exceeds the editor's number of Chinese journals. With such a shortage of editorial positions in journals, the professional expectation for editors tends to be more complicated, ambiguous, and requires

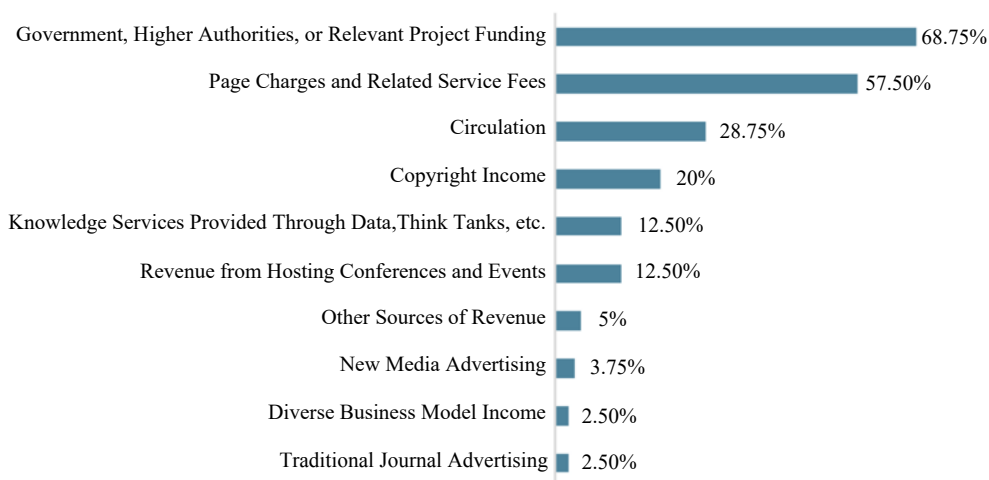


Fig. 1 Main income sources of 259 journals.

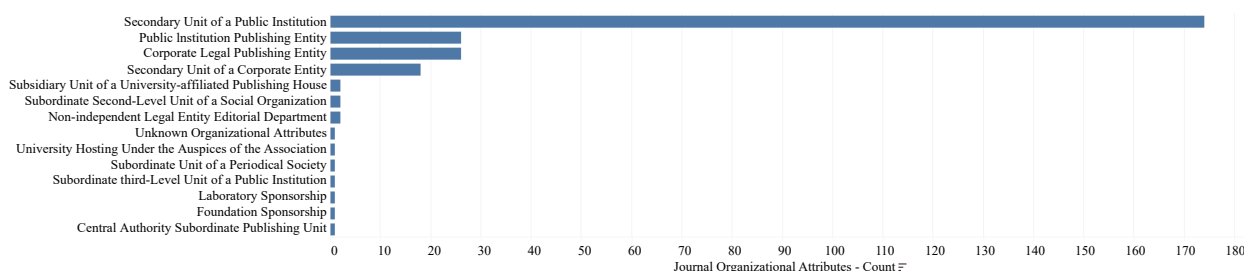


Fig. 2 The administrative positions of 259 journals.

multi-tasking. The most important talent or ability in the urgent demand for those interviewed journals is the so-called 'scholarly editors', which reflects that the journals want editors to not only obtain excellence in editorial ability but who can also be seen as scientific scholars. This can be supported by the question 'What is the most needed abilities for editors?' in the questionnaire. The top two abilities mentioned are digital media operation and picture/video editing, which may imply that Chinese journals have not formed relatively specific and process-oriented personnel modules to adopt the challenging digital publishing era. It is further explained by their recruitment plans, which targets the multi-abilities editors who can take varied roles by oneself, including the above two digital processing abilities. There is an array of skills that editors have been expected to obtain. Editors have even more ambiguous roles when there is already a lack of acknowledgement of the role of editors in the Chinese publishing system, since editors still play a trivial role in this environment. Last but not least, through analyzing the description texts of editors' recruitment, there is a study<sup>[16]</sup> showing that a personal trait that is mostly wanted by Chinese journal managers is to 'enjoy dedicating themselves to others (authors)'. Editors' professional images tend to be sugar-coated in certain ways in China, because Chinese academic publishing system is not only economically centered but also culturally and politically centered. Editors' roles and behaviors can be linked to the Chinese working ethics and political mottoes, where scholars and other players have different expectations for the profession.

### Editorial procedure compliance problems

Referring to the actual process of editing and reviewing for academic publishing. Issues have been identified since the publishing procedure does not fit precisely with the review regulation issued by the government from the 1950s and onwards. During the questionnaire design process, the focus is primarily on enhancing publishing efficiency. According to the questionnaire, 50% of journals indicate a processing time of 3-4 months for submitted articles. Meanwhile, 65.28% of journals express satisfaction with the article processing speed. Discussions with the government have revealed concerns about the potential negative impact of article processing speed on the international visibility of Chinese journals. On the other hand, when discussing this problem with the government side, the governmental funder, seemingly put themselves in a time-consuming competition with prestigious international journals (i.e., Science, Nature), leading to a logical mindset where the faster the publishing speed can be, the more decisive for Chinese journals to bring up international breakthroughs in the areas of scientific innovation. Thus, the government is worried that journal processing speed might be a negative factor in Chinese journals' visibility in an international context. Finally, the discussion with the government side partly shows the speed of publishing has mostly been considered as a key factor to adjust the editorial procedure.

However, when it comes to the interviews, a similar response was mentioned by 8 editors-in-chief. The editors-in-chief are more concerned with compliance with new reviewing regulations. The three-level review system was first copied from the Soviet Union to safeguard censorship over the press after The People's Republic of China (Oct. 1949)<sup>[17,18]</sup>. Later, it got employed in all publishing units, including books and journals<sup>[19-21]</sup>. This new review system has three layers, the three-level review layers start with the editorial office where the editors give a first review, a second review is then reviewed by the director of editors and a final review ends with the editor-in-chief of the journal<sup>[22]</sup>. Due to the fairness and academic approval, by the 1990s, international peer-review practices had progressively become the mainstream manuscript-reviewing format in Chinese scientific journals<sup>[22]</sup>.

Apart from the increasingly popular manuscript-reviewing format in China, the Chinese academic publishing procedure is also experiencing an increase in the preference for adapting online academic publishing. Li's statement provides evidence of an increase in CSSCI-listed education journals adopting online peer-review practices<sup>[23]</sup>, suggesting the adoption of both single- and double-anonymous peer reviews online. In China, there are two favorable peer review systems online. In the questionnaire, 62.69% of journals claimed they had implemented double-anonymous peer review, meanwhile, single-anonymous peer review was chosen by 31.09% of journals in total. It suggests that both single- and double-anonymous peer reviews have been adopted online in China. The modification in the actual editorial process is progressive, but it seems like the peer review system has still not been officially and properly embedded into the three-level reviewed system in the online publishing procedures which were initiated by the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP). The online publishing procedures appear to remain unofficial and incomplete. This lack of integration and adaptation poses challenges for journals in elucidating the idea that peer review serves solely as a support mechanism for the second level of review hosted by the director of editors<sup>[24]</sup>.

There were two administrative who found worth mentioning on the release of GAPP in 2019 when searching related public policies online (see 'Opinions on Deepening Reform and Cultivating World-class Scientific and Technological Journals') and 2021 (see 'Opinions on Promoting the Prosperity and Development of Academic Journals') underscore the importance in enhancing the quality of the peer review system while simultaneously emphasizing three-level review system's significance status in the entire editorial procedures. It is noticeable, that the peer review system and the three-level review system seem juxtaposed as two individual methods, potentially operating without directly interfering with one another. However, this perception might not entirely align with the actual reality of the editorial procedures and the relationship between each editorial process.

The implementation of peer review has been inconsistent as mentioned above. An inconsistency in defining the chief editor has been identified by Jiang & Wang. The authors state the phenomenon of 'leading to a dependency on chief editors'<sup>[25]</sup>. Due to the lack of clarity for both responsibilities and processes for the editors, there is a significant challenge in lessening the workload for chief editors. A limited fraction of manuscripts undergo external reviews, leading to prolonged decision-making periods, delayed and insufficient feedback, and a lack of review input<sup>[26,27]</sup>. Ultimately, this inconsistent peer review procedure accumulates into an issue of editorial procedural compliance.

Some researchers did not only criticize the inefficient peer review procedure but also criticized the Chinese peer review system for being only a partial innovation in the context of the three-level review system. Hence it still cannot be called a truly independent peer review system in the Chinese academic publishing sphere<sup>[18]</sup>. It is because research in 366 economics journals found that in practice only 29 journals use anonymous review, the rate of adopting this type of peer review is quite low by the Chinese economic journals<sup>[28]</sup>. Subsequently, there is a lack of empirical and in-depth theoretical research on the overall status of peer review in Chinese academic journals, which reflects that the peer-review system is not officially required by the regulator, and as an internationalized fruit, it still has to be covered by a public 'excuse' to make it fit with the Chinese peer review system. In comparison, international research's adaption of peer review is more extensive<sup>[29]</sup>. A survey about peer review procedures of international journals showed that, since 2000, only 0.1% of the 833,172 articles published in 361 journals had not



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been peer-reviewed<sup>[30,31]</sup>. International journals and journal publication procedures are more mature and well-structured than the Chinese publication procedure. What is more important in this context is the fact that in China's academic publishing industry, the role of the editors is still a systematic issue that needs to be solved.

Even though the international journal publication procedure has more history and experience than the domestic procedures. The presence of bias in the editorial and peer review is embedded in both Chinese and English journals<sup>[26]</sup>. Studies have proven that the higher the recognition of academics in a particular field, the more favorable their work will be presented to different journals, and this is the case for the Chinese as well as the foreign journals<sup>[26,32]</sup>. As might be expected, the Chinese editorial procedures need much more improvement compared to the English journals as there were plenty of issues identified by the Chinese interviewees in the questionnaire, and four identified problems mentioned previously.

Another systematic problem that has also been mentioned by 13 interviewees that was identified as an editorial procedure compliance problem is the role of an editor-in-chief should play in the editorial procedure. The editor-in-chief is the head of the journal and is held accountable for delegating tasks to staff members and managing editors. Their responsibilities for most international journals may include reviewing articles and photographs, contributing to editorial pieces, and managing publishing operations. The survey shows that 66.02% of managing editors are adjunct professors, senior researchers, or the dean of a college or university who have a great reputation in the academic field. One of the interviewees commented on this phenomenon: 'It is hard to see editors-in-chief constantly engaging in the day-to-day editorial work as they got so occupied by their main duty. Therefore, the executive editor supervised by the editor-in-chief is the one who is actually in charge of the overall content of the publication'. The editor-in-chief functions as a critical administrative position yet can be taken as an adjunct role. That is how in the questionnaire, 57.53% of editors think the duty of editor-in-chief should be regulated given its original and traditional definition and requirements. In China, editors' role in editorial procedures needs to be further developed systematically. Whereas the other 42.47% of editors take the opposite side of this phenomenon and think there is no need to clarify editors' responsibilities. For the latter side, the main reasons have been given as follows:

- 1) The adjunct editors-in-chief may not be professional enough to guide the editorial procedure;
- 2) Most of the editors-in-chief were generally too busy to take care of the specific editorial operations.
- 3) There are not many studies discussed on the role of editors-in-chief in the context of Chinese journals. However, the professional dislocation between the personnel practice and talent policy still exists as a disturbing issue for both sides, where actual responsibility does not come with the leading position of editor-in-chief. There is still an unsettling dispute about the necessity of publicly regulating editors-in-chief's duties, depending on the comprehension of the role of editors-in-chief, as an administrative or a mere professional role.

It is argued that the three issues outlined above encapsulate the primary concerns of governing bodies, prompting them to seek resolutions through investigations and discussions with editors from reputed journals within the domestic academic sphere. However, the perceived 'high quality' is not necessarily attained by international journals. There were 75% of the participants in a study claimed that there was difficulty in accessing formal training in peer review when the majority of participants were either independent researchers or primarily affiliated with an academic organization<sup>[33]</sup>. Thus, the peer review procedure is hardly efficient in the foreign

academic sphere and it can be even more challenging in a Chinese context.

Moreover, through anticipating this project, editors convey other practical and compliance problems they have faced, mostly related to policy-making and administrative regulation. Researchers would tend to observe communication and intentions, which have been shown in their questions (raised by the governors' side) and answers (raised by the editors' side). As it has discussed in this part, the unified Chinese publishing policies and regulations provide a strong boost for the rapid development of the national publishing industry, eventually leaving journals to survive in a competitive environment that deeply relied on the recognition of sponsors in different ways. From a critical perspective, this parasitic relationship shows its strict and rigid way of personnel assignment and official reviewing procedure, while it also leaves optional room for importing international perspectives and methodologies to build and develop its publishing service and process. The tension between practice and policies in Chinese journal publishing can seem both conservative and creative. Journal publishing in the Chinese context has achieved creativity as it incorporated with its unique political and cultural factors. However, since the development of the academic publishing procedure is lacking in both the review system and online system, it can be considered as conservative. In the end, it leads the research to further discuss the inconsistent phenomenon coexisting beneath the surface of the Chinese publishing system.

## Discussion on the editorial problems under the Chinese publishing policies

The fourth problem that was identified by the intellectuals in the survey focuses on contextualization of the identified (editorial) problems as a distinctive product of the Chinese administrative and cultural environment. Chinese journal publishing policies are capable of keeping internal routines from past experiences and cultural backgrounds, while being able to adopt international publishing characteristics, operations, skills, and technologies. It has successfully powered a strong publishing industry with rapid academic growth. This gradual growth started to penetrate both domestic and international markets without a higher-level interference of the academic capital, which means that there are other types of capital or values that are vital to the journal publishing policies in China. Therefore, the most important question is: what motivated different parties and stakeholders to create values within the field of Chinese journal publishing if it is not driven by the markets? Through conducting this survey, some misalignments between practice and regime deserve more elaboration in the way of constructing a Chinese journal publishing framework consisting of the intentions from that of the governor and the editor. In this case, the introduction of resource dependency theory<sup>[31]</sup> is useful to link with the surviving strategy of Chinese journals, compared to the business or economic model<sup>[34,35]</sup>. Based on the resource dependency theory, the Chinese journals can exchange benefits other than economic ones. This environment circulates forms of valuable resources when Chinese journals are under a shortage of financial support. The theory therefore objects to the idea that a journal system is solely based on economic factors to a certain extent and suggests a resources-based model in a socially and politically oriented Chinese society. The theory further suggests resources such as political capital, professional ethics, and society habitus jointly help to create the Chinese self-thriving publishing ecosystem. Editorial procedures within this ecosystem obtain political and social characteristics. Without these resources and distinct characteristics, Chinese journal publishing would not be easily identified as a self-thriving field for editors. The emerging problems for the editorial definition, role,

and procedures thus can also be reflective as a systematic issue from the cultural and political aspect. In this way, the resource dependency theory provides a survival strategy for the Chinese journals within its ecology, meanwhile, systematic issues have been embedded within this proposed model.

### The budgetary constraints imposed on journals

The incentive problems of Chinese state-owned companies (SOEs) have been substantially researched ever since the commencement of the Chinese reform and opening up at the end of 1978. Discussions were solely based on SOEs' profitable performance, still, some researchers questioned the validity of using productivity growth as an index of efficiency improvement in SOEs. These researchers argue that measured growth of total factor productivity (TFP) may be a misleading indicator of SOE performance given the significant nonprofit objectives of SOEs<sup>[36]</sup>. Journals and SOEs in China share some common characteristics, including the budget constraint problem, as they are both designed to create social and economic profits. Like SOEs, journals are also trapped with the dilemma of public interests and profit goals and even have to promote the interests of their sponsoring institution. Although based on the results of the survey, journals are facing severe budgetary shortages, as journals are under the lower level of the hierarchy system than SOEs. Alternatively, the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of China (PDCC) issued a policy to encourage more qualified journals to transfer from public organizations to companies<sup>[37]</sup> (see 'Opinions on promoting the prosperity and development of academic journals', 2021). The adjustment for the journals is clear, but the budget constraint problem still seems to persist in most journals. SOEs also experienced such transformation and encountered a similar situation. The softening budget constraint<sup>[38]</sup> has been raised up to explain the condition when the strict relationship between the expenditure and the earnings of an economic unit (firm, household, etc.) has been relaxed because their excess expenditure has been paid by some other institution. For journals, the excess expenditure has been paid by other units under the sponsoring institutions, which typically can be seen as paternalistic institutions. As a result, the softening budget constraint may weaken the journal's marketing responsiveness, which leads to a loss in efficiency. Under certain conditions, it may generate excess journals in the limited China standard serial number. It is testified by their urgent need for editors who have marketing talents in the questionnaire. Therefore, the budget problem indirectly labels editors with marketing skills, which strengthens editors' role and definition, though this might not be an ideal definition for the editors themselves.

Another interesting fact mentioned by one interviewee, which may partly explain the motivation mechanism for Chinese journals with budget constraints problem is by one interviewee mentioning that: 'Profiting figure is definitely a major factor for the university (generally the sponsoring institutions) to evaluate journals' performance, but definitely not the critical factor. In the end, it is just a figure written as several lines in the yearly performance reports'. It is intriguing to reinterpret the instability and variability of those journals living in an organizational environment, with a soft budget tied with its paternalistic institution or other safe alternative methods. It requires more empirical research on the head of sponsoring institutions. However, it is not sufficient to analyze its productivity based on the index of impact factors. For future study, the reporting mechanism can be seen as an important text to analyze the indicator framework of Chinese journals.

### The highly self-disciplined expectation for editors

The Chinese professional ethics in the fields of education, medicine, and IT have been studied carefully<sup>[39–42]</sup>, while this is not

the case for the editors. As they serve the public sector, the professional ethics of editors stimulate editors' enthusiasm and ambition. A story created for Chinese editors is the role of a tailor making bridal clothes for other folks to wear, in other words, an academic tailor providing editing services for researchers to publish. This metaphor has been frequently mentioned in the interviews by 12 editors-in-chief. Surprisingly, this professional ethic has been pictured as a noble calling for editors to discipline themselves and to devote their time and energy to their careers. When combining this ethic with the current personnel number of editors in a journal, the heavy workload can be deduced from the inadequate human resources of editors. Some Chinese editors need to work harder than international editors if they need to finish the same workload. At the same time, they need to serve both the institution and society as part of their duty. Chinese ethical principle and the ideology of 'serving the people' were formulated because journals are required to put the social and political interests first, rather than economic profits. The highly self-disciplined expectations of editors revolve around social and political capital, which is proposed in the knowledge- and resource-based model.

The idea of 'serving people' is important in Chinese society as well as the resource-based model, where the preferred social interest is related to the Chinese term *guanxi* (relationship translated from Chinese). *Guanxi* is essential in Chinese society as well as the Chinese journal publishing industry. Yang<sup>[43]</sup> has argued that *guanxi* 'subverts the dominant mode of [the] economy', which also shows Chinese individual values, social assessment, and career moral hierarchy system. A career with high moral standards is respectable and also complies with the mainstream labor values in China. As Lin explains in the article written by Jiang & Shi, '*guanxi*' facilitates 'the flow of information, influences the distribution of resources, serves as social credentials for those seeking favors, and reinforces the identity and recognition of the actors involved'<sup>[26]</sup>. Therefore, based on the highly disciplined mindset and perception of the interviewed editors, the condition of the journal publishing industry is not only driven by the market and ethical appraisal, social recognition should also be considered at least a complimentary factor in analyzing Chinese editors' incentives.

At the same time, an inconsistent problem has also been shown at the theoretical level and practical level for the questioning of editors' roles. The answer to it is abstract. When discussing about what is the most ideal editors for Chinese journals, a 'scholar-like editor' has been imaged by most of the interviewees. This topic has been discussed for over 30 years. According to Du's review paper of the academic articles on the calling for the 'scholar-like editor', started from an article (1985) published by Wang Meng, a famous Chinese writer who served as China's Minister of Culture from 1986 to 1989. In that article, Wang mentioned that 'authors are less like scholars', which may hinder the future enhancement of the Chinese literary industry<sup>[44]</sup>. This reflection also affected editors' self-position, leading to a heated discussion on promoting editors' scholarly characteristics. Taking 'scholar' and 'editor' as combined keywords, a total of 963 related articles can be found on the CNKI, the mainstream platform of the Chinese academic database. Even under such fierce discussion, the actual situation is hard to follow up with its theoretical development. One interviewee mentioned that even though the editors and scholars are in the same personnel assessment system, the editors have been treated as a lower hierarchy in their career with lower salaries which indirectly links to receiving less respect from their superior colleagues and departmental peers. However, there is not much research interested in comparative analysis of the income status between editors and researchers. There is no evidence to prove editors' working conditions as poorer than the scholars, nor the fact that they have not been fairly treated. In the

end, one can notice that a popular phrase like 'scholar-like' would indirectly reflect which role or career is more popular in the Chinese publishing discourse field. The frequent usage of the phrase implies that there is a career moral hierarchy system embedded into China's academic publishing industry.

### The reviewers between peer review and three-level review

Peer review is introduced as a crucial measure of quality control, enhancing the trustworthiness and transparency of the publishing procedure for all stakeholders in the academic industry, including authors, readers, funders, and the entire ecosystem. For instance, the Association of American University Presses in the US requires those universities that have registered with full membership to take the procedure of peer-reviewing of books before publication as a basic requirement. However, this demand has not been applied in any other publishing industries (i.e., the academic countries excluding the US), or at least, it has not been officially regulated within the academic regime of that country, even though the publishing industry is under strict censorship. Whether it has been intentionally avoided to be regulated or kept skeptical about the idea imported from Western culture, peer review is taking a predominant role in the procedure of the Chinese journal publishing industry<sup>[45]</sup>. This problem results in editor's confusion, which is the compliance with the three-level review issued by GAPP. That is because the conflicts specifically focusing on the 2<sup>nd</sup> layer of review makes the right of the referee hang in doubt. The intrinsic question is covered by the tension between the responsibility of political censorship and the calling for academic transparency, where the former is supposed to be taken by editors, and the latter should be the responsibility of the academic authorities. For now, the floor is mostly taken by academic authorities, while editors-in-chief only take responsibility for its political correctness in the 2<sup>nd</sup> layer of review. It is easy to take it as an unspoken topic, but the influence of this inconsistent phenomenon deserves more research. For example, the challenge towards the editors' professional independence and the accountability of experts are hard to clarify and strengthen both from the perspectives of practice and policy.

### Academic institutional influence vs editorial power

The administrative roles of editors-in-chief can also be seen as a side-effect of the above-mentioned inconsistent relationship. In general, an academic game field consists of 3 main forces, which are the academic freedom of intellectuals, the academic autonomy of institutions, and the interference of external powers<sup>[46]</sup>. Surveys such as the one conducted by Yan<sup>[47]</sup> have shown that 80% of intellectuals believed that taking an administrative position in an institution would help to get prompted and funded in academic activities. To further prove the intervention by the administrative power to the whole academic publishing process, 46.6% of the intellectuals believe that administrative authorities play a critical role in charge of academic resources and their distribution. At the same time, another 7% of the intellectuals believe that the decision is made by the dual role of administrative and academic authorities. Furthermore, the last 38% of the intellectuals expressed that collective power is controlled by the pure academic authorities. In this way, administrative power is strongly influencing academic procedures and industry. Yan's research does not only support this finding but also supports the central argument of this essay, is the idea that tension between Chinese administrative power and institutional autonomy keeps existing and threatens the academic collective power balance. That is why, it is important to know that for journals, the key role is the managing editor, who is assigned to the tasks and ought to own dual roles as an academic and administrative authority. Yan's result combined with this study shows that the

management of editors' function is still ambiguous and undeclared in the journal publishing process, presenting how cooperation and regulation have been made by both sides within such specific and practical journal publishing procedures.

To further prove that academic publishing procedures should be intervened by managing editors, Long & Fox argue that 'recognition by peers is an important indication of a scientist's contributions to the advancement of science'<sup>[48]</sup>. Their roles should be noticed, discussed, and respected throughout government-funded projects. This lack of acknowledgment and recognition discloses the fact that there is the necessity to realize and actualize a new journal publishing process with editors taking more responsibilities than under an adjusting process. The proposed resource-based model should not be criticized, but should be taken into consideration when improving Chinese journal publishing procedures.

Although the arguments point out the weaknesses and problems of the Chinese journal publishing industry in the Western context values high maturity and experience. We intend to understand the intrinsic game between the Chinese academic journals and administrative powers. For example, even though interviewees talked about the role of this 'unprofessional' administrative managing editor during the interviews, they seldom questioned its necessity in this environment. The interest of the essay is to delve into this complex relationship. To explain this phenomenon, one of the interviewees describes that administrative power is highly effective if it can be used by the journal. It reminds us to take this discussion into the context of the Chinese publishing industry which is not dominated by academic capitalism. Since the market does not have a direct serving objective for the journals, the transferring of publishing service and production into governmental currency seems more important than market benefits. A political consciousness may also be deeply rooted in editors' minds, which can be observed in almost all the editors because some editors are keen to get more insights about the publishing policy-making trend. The reliance on assistance and guidance from administrative power tends to be more enduring and stable than our prior assumptions. In the end, it primarily revolves around how players leverage rules to maximize their benefits within a relatively autonomous and self-serving field.

### Conclusions

This study aimed to gain and enhance comprehension of the inconsistencies on the practical level (presented through the editorial benefits) and policy level (presented through the governmental intentions). It attempted to accomplish this by conducting and observing a co-designed questionnaire and survey joined by the two key players. The predominant discovery that emerges from this study underscores the necessity of reconstructing Chinese publishing discourse based on the theoretical balance between social and economic benefits. More specially, this reconstruction heavily relies on the practical contexts shaped by the government and sponsoring organizations, significantly altering the meaning and distribution of assessment indices for the journal. Social and economic benefits related to government or sponsoring organization forces the academic publishing field to face itself with social benefits-oriented approach and procedures. In this way, the professional understanding of all these academic stakeholders is undergoing a redefining and reshaping process under domestic circumstances. The Chinese journal publishing characteristics should be retained when all the processes such as learning, reshaping, and adapting are included in the international publishing procedures and regulations. It remains indiscernible whether a pivotal turn would occur and change the professional status of editors. For instance, whether it will adopt a more Westernized approach, transform the role of editor from 'servant' to 'judge', or persist with its already established



Chinese morally shaped professional image. However, the insightful communications and discussions generated during and after conducting the survey show that there is some practical space and potential remaining for journals themselves to create flexible rules and explore more innovative services for the future. Therefore, our argumentation does not align with the idea that the Chinese industry has not been well-regulated or excessively regulated when adopting a more systematic perspective. The expansive and centralized nature of the publishing industry in China can hardly possibly manage and design its growth trajectory simultaneously as detailed as they can at present. In practical terms, survival within a competitive Chinese publishing academic industry is when a journal takes advantage of the procedures and policy, while engaging with various stakeholders within the field. The journal would be more advantageous than the other journals, and it would highly and realistically survive in this competitive and socially oriented academic publishing environment.

The essay branched out from the normative perspective of the international publishing market, with the applied methods, the paper provides valuable insights for scholars who might be interested in comprehending the relationship and interactions between the key players (policy-makers and editors), rules and regulations, and cultural habitus within the Chinese journal publishing market. It urges us to consider those distinct factors as rational and natural phenomena to be able to apply for future understanding of the publishing system alternative to the Western system. Thus, it advocates the idea that the Chinese journal publishing is a field ripe for exploration and utilization, rather than mere niche markets to be filled. This notion can be researched, explored, and developed by future scholars who will be captured by the topics related to the Chinese journal publishing market or procedures.

The most salient limitation of this essay was that the survey is not specifically designed for the topic of this essay. It resulted in intellectual perspectives being differentiated and scattered across various subtopics. Some subtopics remained as underexplored, which needed to be further investigated and proved with detailed data and substantial evidence. Additionally, the research tackled a rather broad and abstract topic, it posed challenges in maintaining and forming a coherent discussion flow. There was a clear requirement for a more concrete sociological approach and methodology to buttress and support the hypotheses constructed for the essay. Unfortunately, the attempt to adopt a sociological lens remains scarce among scholars investigating the Chinese publishing system. It posed a notable gap in the current research landscape.

Despite the limitations, this study certainly contributed to the existing understanding of the Chinese journals and academic policy trends. The inquiries raised in the study suggest subsequent investigations that are aimed at validating the specific capital that has been used in the multi-layers of exchange mechanism, including economic capital, relationship (termed as *guanxi* in Chinese) capital, professional ethic capital, and personnel assessment capital. However, these findings did not support strong recommendations to develop targeted interventions aimed at grounding any reviewing academic policies or regulations on the Chinese journal publishing industry at this time. Overall, this study provides important insights about the Chinese academic publishing industry as a self-thriving system involving different exchange mechanisms, where editors have been playing a vital role in the understanding and circulation of the system.

## Author contributions

The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: study conception and design (conducting the governmental project): Wang L; interpretation of the results and theoretical framework

development: Zeng X; analytics of questionnaires and interviews: Xing Y; draft manuscript preparation: Wang L; manuscript revision: Wang L, Zeng X, Xing Y. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

## Data availability

The questionnaire data and the interview materials in this article were partly abstracted from the governmental survey project, and the representative of this project have not given full permission for researchers to share their work. In addition, they contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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