



Does International Publishing Still Matter for China's Social Sciences Scholars?

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Recent years have witnessed a dramatic turn in China's ideology relating to political and social development—amid rising geopolitical tensions with the West, in particular with the United States—which inevitably impacts scholarly research and knowledge production in social sciences in the country. Specifically, China is now determined to mold an alternative model of modernization in place of the one that has been viewed as Western-centric. China's social sciences are thus now entrusted to tell the Chinese story of progress towards modernization. Furthermore, such storytelling must be versed in Marxist theories and guided by Marxist methodology. This article discusses to what

Abstract

This article argues that the recent changes in China's academic appraisal promote domestic publishing in social sciences, while the current stress on ideological correctness ushers in new barriers for China's social sciences scholars to publish in international journals. As such, more and more of China's social sciences scholars would choose to downplay or give up international publishing in the face of such changes and challenges.

extent international/English-language publishing still matters to China's social sciences scholars in view of the circumstances sketched above. The first two decades in the twenty-first century witnessed an outbreak of submissions to and publications in international journals by Chinese authors. Will this trend in social sciences continue or will it take a different turn?

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Changes in Academic Appraisal

Around 2018, China showcased an almost U-turn in academic appraisal exercises, shifting from overtly incentivizing international publishing (with handsome cash and/or professional rewards) to downplaying it along the lines of rectifying excessive emphasis and weight placed on journal articles, professional titles, academic credentials, awards, and projects. One of the major reasons behind this twist is that the growing outputs of scholarly papers did not really translate into innovation strength for the country.

This dilemma raises skepticism over exclusively and excessively seeking for publications, including international publications. They used to be perceived as being of high quality and impact, yet turned out to be increasingly fluctuating in quality and even deteriorating, as well as very costly. This is because a growing number of international journals now see publishing papers from China as a business opportunity, and thus target Chinese authors for revenue without exercising careful quality control. For instance, when being placed on the alert list of the "watered-down journals," one such international journal lost as much as 70 million Chinese yuans (equivalent to over USD 10 million) of its revenues in 2021 alone.

Under the new appraisal scheme, papers are required to stress relevance to China and address issues rooted in Chinese soil. In this context, the changing academic appraisal practices impact social sciences research and publishing even more.

Arguably, research questions and subjects in social sciences tend to be locally contextualized, and thus local relevance and adaptation become a salient trait. As such, China's social sciences researchers are now required to treat domestic and international journals on an equal basis and are encouraged to publish in domestic journals, which is easier and more convenient for local adoption and application. Furthermore, quantification aspects of publications are now downplayed, e.g., the number of SSCI-indexed papers, citations, and journal impact factors; rather, social science scholars are now required to submit their representative pieces for appraisal purposes. At least one-third of such papers have to be published in domestic journals, while there is no equivalent requirement for internationally published papers. In addition, social sciences scholars are now allowed to submit theoretically oriented articles published in major central and/or local media outlets for the appraisal exercise, as well as policy advisory work reports. Should an advisory report be adopted by the government sector or affirmed by a political leader, it could carry more weight than an academic paper of any kind.

Furthermore, now that there are no incentives and supportive services such as English translation, revision, and editing, which used to be provided and covered by some institutions, China's social sciences scholars may be less inclined toward international publishing, if not reluctant. This is because such publications normally take more time and effort, and do not give any extra weight in their academic appraisal and professional development anymore.

Stress on Ideological Correctness

Apart from local relevance and contextual fit, ideological correctness is also stressed in Chinese universities, especially in the field of social sciences research and publications. It is reported that an "Ideology and Politics Index" is being built for higher education institutions, particularly for the key national universities. This means, first and foremost, the requirement to use Marxism as the theoretical guidepost and methodological approach in all social sciences research. China's leader Xi Jinping explicitly stated in 2016 that Marxism must be placed in the guiding position, that is, a Marxist stance, perspective, and method must penetrate the whole spectrum and entire process of social sciences inquiries. He even quoted Confucius to stress Marxism as the exclusive doctrine: "The Way does not like complexity. Complexity quickly becomes too much. Too much leads to

agitation, agitation leads to worry, and worry never solved anything.” It is expected that more and more social sciences scholars will align their research with Marxist doctrine.

Social sciences are now required to interpret Chinese practice and experience, and theorize a Chinese model of modernization—all in a positive and affirmative manner. Such a stress on ideological correctness could raise concern over the acceptance of such Chinese papers in Western academia, where critical thinking traditionally dominates social sciences inquiry.

Conclusion

In sum, international publishing increasingly appears to be becoming a burden on social sciences scholars in China, who now need to work on such publications without the once available systemic support and incentives. Without doubt, those who are committed to international exchange and cooperation will continue plowing in international fields—typically those returnees retaining their international networks and those teaching at China’s top-tier universities where tenure and promotion processes tend to involve international reviewers. Others (who might grow significantly in number), on the other hand, may choose to give up in the face of such challenges. In the meantime, social sciences are also called on to communicate and deliver the Chinese voice, story and ideas to the international arena, which appears to be somewhat paradoxical. ▲

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