

Report

The English-language academic journals of China: trends and developments

Introduction

China's inclusion in the World Trade Organization (WTO) reflects international recognition of the country's role and influence in world trade. One consequence of joining the WTO is that the Chinese government has promised, as part of its participation in the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), gradually to open its printing and publishing market.¹ This will present the Chinese publishing industry with a severe challenge, and highlights China's need for prestigious English-language academic journals. Because English is the language most commonly used and recognized by scientists and readers around the world, English-language academic journals offer a medium for China to present its culture, and technological and developmental progress to other countries. Thus, in parallel with China's economic growth, the development of its English-language journal publishing programme is a matter of considerable importance.

In this report we look briefly at the development and current status of English-language journal publishing in China; we outline some of the mechanisms used and review some of the problems that have arisen.

1. How many English academic journals are published in China?

This is a frequently asked question within

the publishing industry itself² and in Chinese and foreign index institutes, and is therefore a matter of concern to readers and scholars. We and the ISSN China Centre found that there were almost 208 (including 9 that have ceased publication) English-language academic journals published in China from 1929 to July 2001 (a complete list is available from Zhang Yuehong (Helen), jzu_s@mail.hz.zj.cn).

Table 1 shows that few English-language academic journals were published up to the end of the 1970s; but the numbers then rose to a peak, with a total of 150 journals being published from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s in the first surge which followed the steady development of China's economy and its opening up to the outside world. During this period, the best academic institutes and universities in China could get support from the government and big business to finance their publishing programmes.

Since the mid-1990s, numbers have levelled off as conditions in China stabilized. However, we believe there will eventually be a second upturn in accordance with the usual cyclical behaviour of China's publication industry and following China's admission to the WTO.

2. Publishing models

Zhang Lijun *et al.*³ have pointed out the four pathways for publishing English-language journals in China:

1. Publishing by overseas companies, e.g. the German publishing company Springer, the Dutch company VSP, the US company

Table 1 Number of English academic journals published in China (1929-2001)

	Decade									
	1920s	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	
No. of new journals published	1 (ceased publication)	1	0	2 (ceased publication)	0	2	83	105	15	

Allerton, and the Singapore-based company, Gordon & Breach, which have publishing contracts with some of the journals in China. Their business is to publish and print journals put out by the editorial departments in China. These foreign companies are licensed, or they promise, to sell 200–300 copies abroad. The usual licence fee is about \$5,000–6,000 but there are also some companies that have to pay fees of up to \$10,000, depending on the quality of the journals.

2. Self-publishing. Journals such as *Chinese Medical Journal* and *Physics News* use different channels (Internet, Chinese embassies, sales agents, professional societies, etc.) to promote and receive direct orders from abroad. The best seller already has about 500 readers, and the others have about 50–100 overseas readers.
3. Co-operation with a Chinese publishing company such as China International Book Trading. More than 20 journals are published using this method but order levels are low.
4. Promotional and exchange type. Many journals published by universities and the Chinese Academy of Sciences are intended to be used for exchange with other journals from libraries and schools abroad.

3. The difficult position of English-language academic journals

In the past, Chinese academic journals have had publication problems that limited their development. Some journals with a very long history ceased publication because of the limited market or lack of money. Even the best seller, the *Chinese Medical Journal*, has only about 500 permanent overseas subscriptions.

We can summarize the data as follows: journals published by overseas companies have subscription levels of around 100–300 copies; self-published journals have subscription levels of 10–500 copies and those published by Chinese companies have subscription levels of less than 20 copies.

This problem of such minimal orders is not related only to the quality of the journals but also to lack of marketing, promotion, and weak organization. This is the main concern

for the national publishing company and related marketing departments. Even now, China has no English-language national academic journal website. In addition, the most authoritative academic website (www.periodicals.com.cn) has no homepage in English to introduce the services available. Under these circumstances, how can the attention of overseas readers be attracted to China's English-language scientific-technical periodicals?

4. Conclusions

Although China produces many English-language journals, few are real world-class journals. In order to improve, we need to understand the characteristics and rules of the best international journals, e.g. thorough peer review, international editorial boards, first-class publishing processes, and so on. Editors and authors need to attend international conferences to stay up-to-date with the latest developments in their field and to meet potential authors and board members. We also hope that overseas publishers will be able to help the Chinese English-language science journals enter the world market of academic journals.

As Peter C. Katz has pointed out:

In our global economy, it is very important that good scholarly communication takes place, not simply via informal communications on the web, but also through scientifically peer reviewed articles published in well-respected journals.⁴

Thus it is important that China should try to have world-class journals and, in particular to develop English-language science journals to stimulate and promote academic exchange among and between Chinese scientists and with scientists all over the world.

Notes

In this report, the data on China exclude Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan.

1. Wu Shuling, Conscientiously researching WTO, quickening the development of China's publishing profession. *China Publishing Journal*, 2001:8 (total 128), 9–12 (in Chinese).
2. Zhang Yuehong (Helen). *Journal of Zhejiang University (SCIENCE): a new journal for the 21st century. Learned Publishing*, 2002:15(1), 59–62.
3. Zhang Lijun, Fu Xizhan, and Shi Bin. Investigation of

the circulation of the scientific journals (English version) sponsored by national professional societies in the world. *Chinese Journal of Scientific and Technical Periodicals*. 1998:9(4), 226-7 (in Chinese with English abstract).

4. Katz, P. C. Characteristics of a world-class journal. *Engineering Information*. New York, Elsevier, 2001, p. 10.

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Closing date for applications: 31 May 2002