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Commentary:

How far does China still need to go to internationalize her academic journals?*

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1 Purpose of the report

When it comes to the volume of English-language articles published in international journals, Chinese scientists are second only to those in the United States (Editorial, 2010), but this is not the case for academic journals published in English. The total world-wide number of English-language academic journals published in 2011 was 67 546 (Ulrich's Serial Analysis System, 2011); however, current statistics for China are not yet available, potentially because the management department concerned is somewhat slow and inefficient in their work. Our own research determined that according to the following resources: The Academic Department of China Association for Science and Technology (2011) claimed that as of June 2009 China published 212 English-language Sci-Tech journals; The General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) of the People's Republic of China reported that between 2005 to 2009, the number of academic journals ap-

proved to publish in English was 25 (Institute of Media for Foreign Language Teaching of Zhejiang University, 2010). Based on these statistics, we estimate that the total number of academic journals published in English in mainland China is, so far, still under 250, less than 5% of the academic journals ever published in the country, despite the fact that the Chinese government has recently encouraged publishers to produce English-language academic journals.

Academic journals are believed to be one of the most effective methods to disseminate a country's technological achievements and a nation's cultural concepts. In order to make China's knowledge base and cultural ideas accessible to the rest of the world, many Chinese-language academic journals publish titles, key words and abstracts in English. China's academic journals hope to attract international attention and be included in citation indexes such as Science Citation Index (SCI), Engineering Index (EI), Social Science Citation Index (SSCI), and Arts and Humanity Citation Index (A&HCI). In order to accomplish this, China's academic journals need editors who possess English-language proficiency and are able to judge, proofread and polish texts or abstracts written in English by Chinese writers; however, there is doubt as to whether these journals have enough qualified English-language editors. The quality of China's academic journals in regard to English language proficiency is unclear. This paper reports on the findings of four projects commissioned by GAPP and offers reasons for the deficiency of English language capacity of Chinese editors of academic journals through a survey of the qualification of 518 English editors for 469 Chinese academic journals, and proposes suggestions to solve the problems identified.

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2 Findings of the four projects commissioned by the GAPP of China to monitor the language and editing quality in academic journals

In order to be well informed about the quality of China's academic journals published entirely or partly in English and to better supervise these publications, the GAPP of China commissioned four projects in 2007, 2008, 2010 and 2011 to examine language and editing quality of these journals. The projects in 2007 and 2010 targeted journals published entirely in English while the projects in 2008 and 2011 focused on journals that only published titles, keywords and abstracts in English. All four project teams had the same members, but they employed two different standards: one for the evaluations in 2007, 2008 and 2010 where 0.05% was taken as the acceptability rate, which meant that an error rate up to 0.05% was considered satisfactory whereas an error rate over 0.05% was below standard. For the 2011 assessment the standard was set at 0.03% as the satisfactory mark, which has 0.01% latitude over the criterion for all periodicals published in Chinese for which the error tolerance rate is 0.02%.

The results of the four assessments are as follows: A total of 48 out of the 160 journals monitored in 2007 attained a satisfactory rating while 112 failed to attain acceptability, with an acceptability rate of 30%. Of the 100 journals monitored in 2008, 15 (15%) were satisfactory. Twelve (46.2%) of the 26 monitored in 2010 were acceptable. Six (12%) out of the 50 journals monitored in 2011 achieved the required standard. Had the acceptability rate used in 2011 been 0.05%, then 10 out of the 50 would have met the standard and the pass rate would have been 20% (Fig. 1).

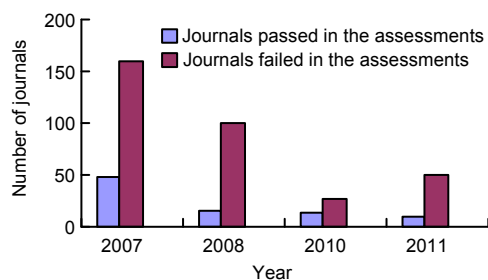


Fig. 1 Numbers of the academic journals attaining acceptability in the four quality assessments by GAPP of China in 2007, 2008, 2010 and 2011

These four assessments revealed that grammatical and structural errors were the most common followed by collocation, usage of vocabulary, logic and expression, spelling, capital letter and small letter, punctuation, format and others. Of the 2760 errors found in 2007, 2209 (80.0%) violated grammatical rules or practical usage. Errors found in 2008 totalled 6730, 5870 (87.0%) of which were in grammar and usage of vocabulary. The study in 2010 found 857 errors altogether with 676 (78.9%) of them falling into the categories of grammatical errors and misuse of expression. The number of errors in grammar and usage of vocabulary found in 2011 was 3077, constituting 75.1% of the 4095 total errors (Fig. 2).

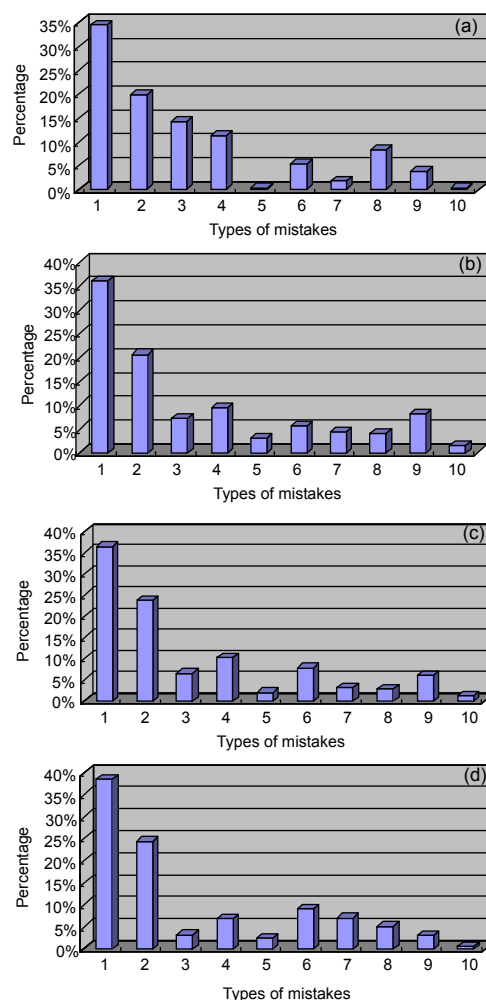


Fig. 2 Types of mistakes and their quantity found in the quality assessments of academic journals by GAPP of China in 2007 (a), 2008 (b), 2010 (c) and 2011 (d) 1: grammar; 2: structure; 3: collocation; 4: usage of vocabulary; 5: logic & expression; 6: spelling; 7: capital letter and small letter; 8: punctuation; 9: format; 10: others

The journals published entirely in English are better in quality than those with their articles' titles, abstracts and key words printed in English. The average ratio of the journals passed in the assessments is 53.1% (entirely in English) vs. 13.5% (partly in English).

Copy editors are expected to write better than authors as one of the basic duties of a copy editor is to correct errors the authors make and to polish texts. The findings of the aforementioned four assessments are shocking, not only showing that many Chinese scholars have difficulty in expressing theoretical concepts and technical findings in English, but also reflecting the fact that some of China's English-language editors do not have the ability to readily correct mistakes; or in other words, that their English is not proficient enough to even tell wrong sentences from right ones. With such a large number of mistakes in basic knowledge of English printed in these academic journals, we cannot help questioning the capability of these journals to effectively express and transmit the academic value of the papers and articles they publish.

Pan and Jian (2008) pointed out that it was the careless and negligent attitude of both the authors and editors that allowed for many mistakes and errors in published journals and magazines, and Lu (2011) attributed the poor quality of editing of China's academic journals to the tight schedule of editors who might overlook errors in order to meet publication deadlines. But can haste or carelessness explain everything?

To find a more clear and persuasive answer to this question, our research conducted a survey to investigate the qualifications of academic journal editors.

3 Survey of the qualifications of English-language editors for academic journals in China

The survey consisted of two parts. The first part was a questionnaire conducted by a project team from the Institute of Media for Foreign Language Teaching of Zhejiang University and the Educational Training Center of GAPP from 2008 to 2010 when seven training sessions were given to the English-language

editors for academic journals in mainland China. 518 participants from 469 academic journals were asked to complete a questionnaire that collected information on age, educational background, research focus and overseas experience. The second part consisted of interviews, in which editors from 128 academic journals were asked similar questions about their editorial staff and 508 editors provided information on age as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Information about the age of the 518 participants in the interviews

Number (persons)	Period (years)
2	1930s
4	1940s
18	1950s
175	1960s
166	1970s
143	1980s
10	Unknown

The information from Fig. 3 shows that all the 518 editors have university degrees: 240 with bachelor's degrees, 226 with master's degrees and 52 with PhD degrees. Thirteen editors received their degrees overseas, three in Britain, two in the USA, two in Australia, one in Canada, one in New Zealand and four in Hong Kong China. While there was wide variation in research orientations, the majority of the 518 editors specialized in subjects directly related to the themes of the journals they worked for while 56 (10.8%) majored in English or subjects such as international trade and business which provide courses related to English.

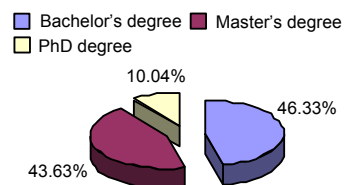


Fig. 3 Participants' educational background

The results of the interviews are as follows: the 128 journals on average have two English copy editors each. Journals published entirely in English have three or more professional English copy editors while journals published with only titles and abstracts in

English usually have one to three part-time English editors each, generally English teachers in colleges or universities known as translators instead of editors. These people all majored in English and most of them hold master's degrees or above. Most of them have short-term overseas work or study experience while a few got their degrees abroad.

4 Analysis of the deficiency of language capacity of English-language editors of academic journals in mainland China

“Good newspapers, good magazines, good news broadcasts and good press releases all have one thing in common: strong teams of editors” (Bowles and Borden, 2009). To a crucial extent, the quality of copy editors' work determines a publication's quality, and of the various qualities a copy editor must possess, his or her ability to judge the value of articles and to polish texts is regarded as the most important. Copy editors should write better than the authors, and more often than not, it is the editors' good language ability that helps make a dull or verbose copy interesting and concise (Bowles and Borden, 2009) though their work is always invisible to readers, sometimes even to the authors. But English, as a Western language, is utterly different from Chinese. Therefore, it is really no easy task for Chinese scholars to write academic papers in good and correct English, and it is, to an equal extent, demanding for English editors whose mother tongue is Chinese to polish those poorly written texts. Though the teaching of English started in China around 1830 when America's first missionary, Elijah C. Bridgman established the Bridgman School in Guangzhou (Gu, 2003), it went through two severe periods of stagnation since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949: (1) the period of reformulation from 1949 to 1965 when the national policy to learn from the Soviet Union made Russian the key foreign language throughout the country and no English courses were given in any middle schools and most normal universities and colleges from 1953 to 1957; (2) the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1977 which brought three “nos” to the teaching of English: no teaching outlines, no teaching plans and no teaching materials (Hu, 2009). These serious setbacks have exerted great impacts on the language profi-

ciency of English learners in China ever since.

The survey we conducted demonstrates that the majority of the English-language editors actively working for the academic journals in China were born in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. People born in the 1960s and 1970s learned English mainly from teachers who majored in Russian and studied English as a second foreign language. Working extremely hard, with very limited teaching materials, many of these Chinese Russian-English teachers were good at explaining English grammatical rules. As most of them were unable to speak English and could only conducted English classes in Chinese, they were known as “dummy English teachers”. Their way of teaching, no doubt, resulted in their students learning about English rather than learning English itself. However, some good English learners were still produced in this period owing to both the individual teachers' dedication and the individual students' diligence.

Now, learners trained by the “dummy English teachers” grew up and some of them became teachers of English for the students born in 1980s. With the national reform and open policies during that time, these students were much luckier. They have had easier access to a variety of original teaching materials and better English teachers who had different opportunities to learn and try new and advanced concepts, methods and technologies and who, in a great number, have long- or short-term training in English-speaking countries. However, though being immersed once or twice in an English environment, they generally claim that they still feel it is a bit too demanding to use English as proficiently as expected, due to their weak and insubstantial foundation. And this unavoidably influences their students in turn in their acquisition of English language capability.

From our survey we see quite a few editors born in or before 1950s. People born in the 1950s rarely learned English before adulthood. Those working for English-language academic journals must have made huge efforts in learning the language. They are now mostly working as supervisors instead of doing editing work. Learners born before the 1950s generally acquired their English from teachers educated in mission schools by native English speakers. Though they have a good command of English, they are now retired and few are found still working as copy editors. The survey revealed that only a little over 10% of the

editors working now for the academic journals were English majors or specialized in subjects related to the language of English, which indicates that academic journals, in reality, need more editors who are accomplished in the subjects of the journals and have a good mastery of English as well. But the present condition is, as reflected in the survey, that a large number of the journals in China do not possess this sort of competent personnel.

It is demanding and exacting to work as qualified editors for academic journals whose goals are to internationalize their publications. When a country does not have enough qualified teachers, can not afford suitable conditions or construct a favorable atmosphere, it is almost impossible to cultivate qualified editing personnel. It is fortunate that China is now improving in all these aspects. She has not only been sending teachers and students abroad for language learning but also bringing in talent from overseas, introducing original teaching materials, collaborating with native English experts to exchange concepts and methodologies, and even hiring native English speakers to proofread and polish papers. China's academic journals have recently been capturing more attention around the world and arousing greater international interest. Journals included in recognized citation indexes have increased by a large margin. For example, in 2011, 138 academic journals published in mainland China were listed in SCI, 8.3% more than that in 2009 when 114 were included, and 63.8% over that in 2007 when the number was only 88 (Thomson Reuters, 2012).

The international citation indexes are, to some degree, tolerant of minor grammatical errors as long as the articles exhibit truly innovative and advanced academic values. That does not mean that the Chinese government's investigation into correct English usage is unnecessary. Nor does it mean that editors can feel free to just allow themselves to ignore their duties and let mistakes and errors exist or even prevail, as was found in the aforementioned assessments.

Different languages follow different grammatical rules and practical usage and the core task for inter-cultural communication is to seek reciprocity in languages with respect to vocabulary, idioms/slangs, grammar/structure, cultural experience, and concepts (Sun, 2008). In order to optimize the internationalization of her culture and scientific achievements,

China has to meet rigorous international standards, which will require multi-dimensional efforts. Teacher training should be given top priority and learners' enthusiasm should be encouraged through a variety of supportive conditions. With regards to the editing quality of academic journals, Chinese government should set strict criteria and standards for journals to follow in addition to conducting quality assessments. At the same time, governments at different levels, organizations of professional practitioners, and publishers should provide editors with ongoing training to improve their English proficiency, editing skills and remind them of their responsibilities. After all, a journal's quality is determined by the quality of its editors, the quality of their language capacity and editing skills and, above all, sense of responsibility.

Errors in grammar and structure are avoidable as long as authors or editors make a substantial effort and pay careful attention. The more challenging aspect is to achieve language interdependence regarding the identification of cultural differences—something rarely realized by those growing up in different cultural environments. Happily, some native English speakers are generously providing editing services (either for free or for small compensation) for some Chinese academic journals. As understanding grows between China and the rest of the world, and with new generations of English students growing up in an era of easy and convenient access to international help and facilities for language learning, we can be hopeful that Chinese academic journals published entirely or partly in English can be equipped with more qualified editors who possess higher English proficiency and that the distance for China to cover in order to internationalize her academic publication will be shortened.

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