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Commentary:

Is editing the roadblock to the internationalization of Chinese academic journals?*

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Abstract: “China’s internationalization” is in part realized through the dissemination of Chinese publications, such as academic journals. Therefore, editorial proficiency in the English language is of vital importance to the quality of the journals. This article analyzes the results of the two projects sponsored by the General Administration of Press and Publication of the People’s Republic of China in 2007 and 2010 respectively, namely the “Analytical Evaluation of Language and Editing Quality of Chinese Academic Journals in English Language Issued in 2006”, and the “Evaluation of Publication Quality of the China-Grown English Periodicals Issued in 2009, Sanctioned from 2005 to 2009”, and proposes solutions to the problems presented therein.

Key words: China internationalization, Quality of academic journals, Editorial proficiency

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English is increasingly used worldwide as the working language in most, if not all, international communications and global interactions. In an effort to transfer their knowledge base to the rest of the world, many non-English-speaking countries publish periodicals in English. According to Ulrich’s Periodicals Directory 2009, of the world’s 34 632 English-language academic journals, over 1500 are published in Germany, more than 1000 in Japan, up to 400 in France, and approximately 200 in Russia. The majority of the journals in the Netherlands and half of those in Korea are in English. Countries such as Brazil, Denmark, Finland, Italy, Poland, Spain, and Switzerland also print a large number of home-grown English-language journals (Project Team of the Na-

tional Natural Science Foundation from the Institute of Scientific and Technical Information of China, 2010).

China is no exception. She began publishing English periodicals in the early 19th century when the American missionary Elijah Coleman Bridgman and the British missionary Robert Morrison established *The Chinese Repository* in Guangzhou (Li, 2010). The history of English academic journals may date back to the *Chinese Medical Missionary Journal* in Shanghai in 1887, later renamed the *Chinese Medical Journal* (Chinese Medical Association, 2010). However, the journal was not only chief-edited by the English missionary Dr. J.G. Kerr, but also written and edited entirely by the foreign missionary doctors in church hospitals. The Peoples’ Republic of China produced its first government-sanctioned English-language periodical *People’s China* in 1950 (Xiaoning, 1999). It documented “national construction”, and was substituted by *Peking Review* in 1957. In 1950, in addition, a few other China-grown English academic journals were ratified as follows: *Chinese Science Bulletin*, *Science in China Series A through E*

* Project supported by the General Administration of Press and Publication of the People’s Republic of China in 2007 (a) and 2010 (b): (a) Analytical Evaluation of Language and Editing Quality of Chinese Academic Journals in English Language Issued in 2006; (b) Evaluation of Publication Quality of the China-Grown English Periodicals Issued in 2009, Sanctioned from 2005 to 2009

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(Department of Newspaper and Periodicals, Information Center, GAPP, 2006).

Apart from these journals, other China-grown English-language science and technology (Sci-Tech) journals released before 1949 continued their publication after the establishment of the Peoples' Republic of China. For example, *Acta Geologica Sinica*, initially published in 1922.

The number of academic journals written in English increased little until China's early reform from 1978 into the 1980s, when a great rise in the launch of English-language Sci-Tech journals and academic journals was witnessed, with 150 ones being published (Zhang, 2002). A spurt in economic growth and internationalization demanded more outward communication, resulting in a publication boom from 1990 to 1995 (Zhang *et al.*, 2003), laying the foundation for mainland China's current status of having over 240 academic journals published in English, 212 of which are Sci-Tech journals (Academic Department of China Association for Science and Technology, 2011).

Different languages follow different grammatical rules and practical usages, 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). To write for journals and magazines in English is no easy task for those whose mother tongue is Chinese. Therefore, editorial proficiency in the English language is of vital importance to the quality of the articles. Editing capacity plays a significant role in the publication of the periodicals, as Mowlana (1997, cited in Guo, 2004) noted in his book "Global Information and World Communication". He categorized newspapers, magazines, academic journals, books, and news agencies as being one of the eight types of international information flow, stating: "To most underdeveloped countries, it is necessary to emphasize the importance of the software developed for communication technology, because there may have appeared in these countries phenomenon that effective international communication cannot be smoothly carried through on account of their ignorance of the software development for communication technology." Here, the "software developed for communication technology" must be augmented by foreign-language editors' proficiency and their ca-

capacity for editing and publishing in English.

In order to better supervise China's home-grown journals and magazines published in foreign languages, the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) of the People's Republic of China commissioned projects in 2007 and 2010 to monitor their language and editing quality. The project in 2007 targeted the periodicals issued in 2006 while the project in 2010 focused on journals published in 2009, sanctioned from 2005 to 2009. Each of the project teams was made up of the same members and they employed the same standard in the two evaluations: 0.05% is the acceptance line, which means that an error rate below or within 0.05% achieves editing-quality satisfaction whereas a rate over 0.05% is below standard. That is, each error in grammar, structure, collocation, use of vocabulary, logic, and expression, or spelling is counted as one error, and errors in punctuation, text-transformation, or format are counted as 0.25 of an error.

The results of the two assessments were as follows: A total of 48 out of the 160 periodicals monitored in 2007 attained acceptability while 112 failed to achieve the required standard. The number of the passable journals was merely 30%. Of the 39 periodicals monitored in 2010, only 18 (46.2%) met the criteria for acceptability.

Admittedly, these results were very disappointing. Moreover, six out of the 48 periodicals passed in 2007 were cultural, educational, or fashion magazines, as opposed to academic journals. That is to say, in reference to the quality of language and editing, only 27.3% of the China-grown English-language academic journals in 2007 passed. And when we look at the year 2010, we find that 13 out of the 39 periodicals scrutinized are pictorials or cultural magazines, including three in other languages, such as Korean, Japanese, and Russian. The number of the academic journals passed in the GAPP's assessment in 2010 was 12, 46.2% of the total.

The GAPP assessments also revealed that grammatical and structural errors ranked among the most common errors, followed in succession by errors in collocation, use of vocabulary, logic, and expression, spelling, text-transformation, punctuation, and format. Of the 2760 errors found in 2007, 2209 violated grammatical rules or practical usages (more than 80% of the total scrutinized). The 2010 study found

857 errors altogether, 676 of which fell into the category of grammatical errors and expression misuse, making up 79% of the total errors found.

The high rate of errors in grammar, structure, collocation, logic, and expression shows that some Chinese scholars have difficulty in expressing theoretical concepts and technical findings in English. At the same time, it is probable that, Chinese editors do not have the ability to readily correct these errors, or simply overlooked them for the sake of publication.

The world has never before seen China so eager to attract international attention and participate in the global communication and competitions. "The Internationalization of Chinese Culture (ICC)" is now an important national policy, and publishing China-grown English-language periodicals is believed to be one of the most effective ways to realize the goal. The results of the two aforementioned GAPP assessments are alarming. Language and editing quality may be a key roadblock of the internationalization of Chinese academic journals in the process of ICC.

After the first quality assessment in 2007, GAPP organized two specific training sessions for the Chinese editors. A total of 145 editors from the 160 related journals and magazines attended the sessions. The result was somewhat positive: two academic journals, which had failed in 2007, passed in 2010.

The effectiveness of the training needs to be further verified, because it was only two of the academic journals failed in 2007 that were monitored again in 2010. They were found to have since been working in collaboration with well-known international publishing groups. The more general effects of these training sessions on the remainder of the journals are unclear.

China's publication industry has a long history of cooperating with overseas publishers. Periodicals and magazines in the People's Republic of China began collaborating with international publishing companies in 1982 (Fang, 2005). According to the statistics reported in 2006 by Zhou (2007), 84 of China's English-language academic journal editing teams had established a cooperative relationship with international publishing groups such as Elsevier, Springer, Blackwell, John Wiley & Sons, Nature Publishing Group, Taylor & Francis, and Oxford University Press. The results of the cooperation are obvious: more overseas scholars contributed articles

to the joint journals; journals were co-edited by Chinese English editors and native English editors and as such, the language quality of the articles could generally be guaranteed; journals were distributed worldwide in different forms, for example, in print, in CD-ROM, through on-line access; and, the influence of the journals expanded, with more citations being made overseas of the articles found therein.

More journals are thereby seeking international partnerships for cooperation. Some academic parties and organizations have been exerting efforts to assist their members in finding and selecting collaborators. For instance, since 2009, the China Association for Science and Technology has launched a series of projects to cultivate competitive Sci-Tech or academic journals for internationalization by supporting the interaction and cooperation with international publishing groups (Academic Department of China Association for Science and Technology, 2011).

However, while there are benefits to this form of cooperation, there are also problems: most foreign publishers produce the electronic versions of the articles and issue them on their own websites, while the journals themselves print and distribute the paper copies. As electronic versions are normally contracted to be published ahead of or along with the printed copies, the income of the journals drops substantially since more subscribers turn to the World Wide Web or on-line purchase. The income loss of the journals may to some extent be made up with the profit share from the web or on-line purchases, as contracted, but as the journals are not permitted to supply readers with free electronic articles, some experts worry that China's visitors to the journals' own websites may gradually decrease.

Beyond the aforementioned issues, the most pressing issue or concern is that quite a few cooperative programs do not literally include co-editing work. Some overseas editors consider the content rather than modify the language. However, many joint journals take it for granted that language problems must have been completely resolved since all the articles had already been "authorized by foreign experts". This is indeed the case illustrated by the aforementioned two quality assessments, where a few joint journals failed to pass. To cooperate with international publishing groups, editing and language polishing must be emphasized. This would definitely

be an efficient way to minimize language errors and train our editors to improve their language competence and editing expertise. While this is not affordable for all academic journals, it would be a better and efficacious solution, in the long run, to attract top-quality personnel to work as English-language editors for journals.

China is presently seeing a large number of overseas scholars and graduates returning from different countries, and thus it seems a good time for journals to recruit qualified editors. Yet, surveys show that few home-comers are willing to work as professional editors, because journals cannot provide them with their expected pay and ideal work environments. Some enthusiasts may, out of interest, work as amateur proofreaders. Without a formal, long-term contract, however, they cannot be relied upon. Therefore, we may have to focus on the staff we presently employ. To perfect the existing editors' language competence and editing expertise would be a practical and more proactive approach, at least for the time being. The training organized by GAPP is a good example, in which editors in service were made aware of the current situation of the language and editing quality of the journals, and trainers analyzed and discussed with the trainees the samples of errors taken from the checked journals.

It is unprecedented that a government should place as much importance to the quality of their journals for internationalization as is happening in China. The recently commissioned "Quality Control & Supervision Center of Publications, GAPP" has been set up to supervise and monitor all the publications in China, including the quality of language and editing of periodicals. China's desire to internationalize its culture and scientific achievements is now being clearly and strongly stated. Besides quality assessments, we suggest that the government place more emphasis on sanction provision by giving official tests to certify the qualification of the applicants, including their editors' English-language proficiency. Regular training in different styles and levels should be provided, not only by the government-related departments, but by different professional organizations as well. Once journals acquire editors with a high-level language proficiency and a strong sense of responsibility, China's dream to internationalize its culture may be realized.

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