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LETTER

# Chinese Academic Assessment and Incentive System

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**Abstract** The Chinese academic assessment and incentive system drew mixed responses from academia. In the essay the author tried to explain why the current assessment system is appropriate in China and an opportunistic behavior in Chinese academia is exposed.

**Keywords** Academic assessment · Incentive system · Scientific misconduct

The Chinese academic publications have boomed in recent years along with the country's increasing inputs into science and technology development. To some extent, the academic assessment and incentive system, which drew mixed responses even from the famous media such as Science Magazine and The Guardian (Hvistendahl 2013; Sample 2013; Luo 2014), stimulates a dramatic increase of academic publications.

The quantity and quality of publications is the important index used to assess the researchers' academic performance for promotion and for success in research funding in China. The papers indexed by Thomson Reuters' Science Citation Index (SCI), Thomson Reuters' Social Science Citation Index (SSCI), Elsevier's Engineering Index (EI) or published in the Chinese Core Journals are normally supposed to be high-quality in the current assessment system. This applies especially to the papers published in the SCI journal with a relatively high impact factor in its discipline which play an important role; this phenomenon was criticized and exists not only in China (Schekman 2013). From the peer-review process of the academic journals, we can see that the quality of the accepted paper is not controlled by the impact factor of the journal but by anonymous referees and an editorial

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board. It is hard to give an example to deny the truth that a journal with relative high impact factor in its discipline has a professional editorial board and normally allocates the submitted manuscript to appropriate referees. A top journal in its discipline normally could be supposed to be the epitome of quality, although this is not 100 % guaranteed. While taking account of the SCI papers and journal's impact factor in the assessment of promotion and success in achieving research funding, the third independent party, the paper's referees and journal's editorial board, actually intervene and they are more objective and fair. The current assessment system is not perfect but appropriate in China.

All viable organizations must provide a tangible or intangible incentive to individuals in exchange for contributions of individual activity for organizations (Clark and Wilson 1961). Except the moral incentive and natural incentive, financial incentives in academia are by no means rare (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fields_Medal; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nobel_Prize). There is no ground for blaming the financial incentive system in China. The Chinese Academy of Sciences divided the SCI journals into four categories by the journals' average impact factors in the last 3 years. In some universities and institutes, the amount of bonus paid to the successful author corresponds to the category of the paper. As for the amount of financial rewards for publications in journals with a high impact factor in China (Sample 2013), it depends on the organizations' financial capability. The price of a diamond is never linearly proportional to its weight (https://www.diamonds.pro/diamond-prices/).

This assessment system put Chinese academic researchers in more than 2000 universities and institutes in China under the pressure of "publish or perish". The pressure to publish is a cause of increased scientific misconduct and fortunately science is based on self-correction by stringent testing and experimentation (Fang 2009), these misconducts are being exposed (Hvistendahl 2013) and will be corrected. Actually, another phenomenon that should address the policy-maker's concern is the SCI and EI conferences. Academic conferences in China boomed in the last 15 years. For example, 102, 174, 430 and 409 proceedings of academic conferences held in China correspondingly to the years 1998, 2003, 2008 and 2013 are included in Thomson Reuters' Science Conference Proceedings Citation Index (http://thomsonreuters.com/conference-proceedings-citation-index/). As the peer-review process of reputed journals is rigorous and the acceptance rate is low, the academic conferences provide a fast publication and paper index service as times requires. The manuscripts submitted to this kind of conference normally don't go through a rigorous peer-review process and the submissions are rarely rejected as long as authors pay the registration fee of around 2000RMB (about 300$). Errors in the papers are inevitable and the quality of the proceedings cannot be guaranteed by the conference organizers. Besides producing academic junk, this kind of conference procedure distorts the normal advancement of science especially in China. As Gresham's famous law of "Bad money drives out good" states (http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/2458), "bad" money being assigned the same face value as "good" money containing a higher amount of precious metal will drive out the "good" money. From the author's point of view, the well-organized academic conference absolutely cannot be driven out by the so-called "bad" conference, but

the promotion of high-level academic conferences in China would face the setback and be constrained. This phenomenon will not be deterred until a reasonable adjustment of the academic assessment system is carried out.

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