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Abstract

This study examines Chinese universities' incentive schemes for international publication in the humanities and social sciences (HSS). It analysed 172 incentive documents collected at 116 research-intensive universities in China, including monetary bonus schemes and career-related incentives. This analysis is complemented by interviews with six senior administrators at six Chinese universities and four journal editors to explore the policy-making process and impacts of incentivisation. The study found that most universities actively promoted international publications, with variations and similarities in their incentive schemes. In general, more benefits were granted for SSCI (Social Sciences Citation Index) and A&HCI (Arts and Humanities Citation Index) journal publications than domestic publications. We conclude such incentivisation showcased the influence of western standards and global benchmarking in the internationalisation of Chinese HSS, and that the incentive schemes may create a 'Matthew Effect' enabling SSCI and A&HCI journals to flourish, while deepening the divide between these and other journals.

Keywords

Humanities and Social Sciences, international publications, internationalisation, research incentives, China

Bios

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Introduction

International research publications and their subsequent citations are widely used as key criteria in global university rankings, and also as indicators of higher education institutions' level of internationalisation (L. Li 2009; Hazelkorn 2015). Because of these widespread practices, many governments and higher education institutions now encourage publications in international journals in their pursuit of 'world-class' status (Chou 2014; Shin 2007).

In China, incentives for international publications first emerged in the natural sciences (NS) in the late 1980s, with financial rewards to academics for publications in Science Citation Index (SCI) journals (Qin and Zhang 2008). In the past decades, China's NS outputs have gained increasing visibility in the world, reaching a share of 18.6% of global science and engineering publications, the largest share as a single country in 2018 (US National Science Foundation, 2018). Comparatively, China's global share of humanities and social sciences (HSS) publications in internationally-indexed journals remains much lower, accounting for only 3% in Elsevier's Scopus database in 2018 (SCImago n.d.).

In the Chinese context, 'HSS' is used as a concept in contrast to NS, including humanities and social sciences disciplines (Liu 2003). The unequal global status of Chinese HSS and NS can be traced back to research policies before the 2000s, when the development of HSS was overlooked and the strategy of internationalising HSS was a one-way 'learning from advanced research in global academia' (National Education Committee 1994). Since the early 2000s, however, the policy discourses have been counter-balanced by highlighting the significance of HSS and the exportations of research, known as the 'going-out' strategy (Feng, Beckett, and Huang 2013). National policies advocated the enhancement of HSS academia via the 'going-out' strategy, with the aim to improve China's 'discourse power' by internationalising HSS (National Planning Committee of Philosophy and Social Sciences 2011; National Planning Committee of Philosophy and Social Sciences 2006).

Echoing the changing policy discourses, more and more universities in China are encouraging HSS academics to publish in internationally-indexed journals. Particularly some '985' and '211' universities, namely the 116 research-intensive universities designated by the Ministry of Education (MOE) with the mission to become 'world-class universities' (China Academic Degrees & Graduate Education Information 2012, 2009), have incorporated incentive schemes for HSS international publications in their internationalisation strategies (F. Huang 2015; Yuan 2011).

Such practices have raised heated scholarly and political discussion. Some scholars support the incentives for HSS international publications, as they view the number of international publications from China as essential demonstrations of Chinese academia's global visibility and impacts (L. Li 2009; Luan and Jiang 2008). However, some argue that since HSS research are largely cultural-bound, an over-emphasis on global scholarship might change Chinese HSS academics' focus on Western issues, or Chinese issues that Western readers are more likely to care about, 'accept Western concepts and theoretical frameworks without critical scrutiny and creative thinking', and 'adopt them as academic standards' (Deng 2010, 182; Zhu 2009). The central government and President Xi Jinping also advised Chinese HSS scholars not to import Western knowledge and ideologies indiscriminately (The Communist Party of China Central Committee 2004; Xi 2016).

Chinese universities are also criticised for 'worshipping' publications in journals indexed by SSCI and Arts & Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI), the two most widely-used indices by Chinese universities in HSS research evaluation (C. Li and Lyu 2015, p. 173). This is despite the fact that the MOE has urged universities to respect both national and international research, use citation indices rationally in research evaluations, and avoid the tendency to emphasise quantity over quality (Ministry of Education 2006, 2011b).

Despite current debates, little is known about the scale and structure of such incentive schemes. Therefore, this paper aims to present a national landscape of incentive schemes for HSS international publications through extensive documentary analysis, complemented with senior administrators and journal editors' perspectives on their role in internationalising HSS research in China.

Literature review

Research incentives based on publications in international journals and their subsequent influences are generating global scholarly discussion (Butler 2003; H. Lee and Lee 2013; Franzoni, Scellato, and Stephan 2011). An international study of 30 countries has identified three types of governmental incentives: funding-related incentives for institutions, career-related incentives for individuals, and cash incentives for individuals (Franzoni et al. 2011). In non-English speaking contexts, Shin (2007) reported that in South Korea, SSCI publications were used as the 'guiding light of social science', resulting in the devaluation of Korean-language publications and the withering of indigenous social sciences (p. 113). Chou (2014) noted an 'SSCI syndrome' in Taiwan (p. 1), which emphasised SSCI publications in HSS research, leading to intensified utilitarianism, social inequity, and academic hegemony of native English-speaking countries.

Previous research also identified the challenge of assessing HSS research, as a result of major differences between HSS and NS research in publication and citation patterns, such as the preference for book publication and citation in the HSS (Hicks 1999; Nederhof 2006; M. Huang and Chang 2008). Studies also found limitations of SSCI and A&HCI databases in terms of the unbalanced coverage of disciplines, languages, and geographical contexts (Archambault, Vignola-Gagné, Côté, Larivière, & Gingrasb, 2006). Subsequently, it is argued that HSS research should not adopt the same evaluation methodologies as NS, which put significant weight on bibliometric metrics (Nederhof 2006; M. Huang and Chang 2008).

In the context of Chinese higher education, although several studies have reported the existence of monetary incentives for NS publications (Vidovich, Yang, and Currie 2007; Stephan 2012; Hvistendahl 2013) and the wide-use of metrics in research evaluation (Shao and Shen 2012), only one study has examined the scale and structure of financial incentives for NS publications. That study investigated 168 monetary incentive documents from 100 Chinese universities, and found that universities offered the authors of each SCI publication a bonus of 30 USD to 165,000 USD, depending on the journals' rankings and impact factors (Quan, Chen, and Shu 2017). The research did not include incentives in HSS, and the scope was limited to financial incentives, rather than other forms of incentives—a gap that our study aims to fill.

Our study aims to contribute to the scholarly discussion about the internationalisation of research, with the case of Chinese higher education. The study also extends the body of literature on HSS research evaluation, by exploring the policymaking of publication incentives in HSS. Practically, this study reviews and provides implications for institutional policymaking about internationalising, evaluating, and incentivising HSS research, in China and in other non-English speaking countries.

Methodology

The study collected and analysed 172 institutional incentive documents from all 116 '985' and '211' universities in China. Considering the difficulty to investigate all incentive documents published by the 2879 universities in China (Ministry of Education 2016), the study focused on '985' and '211' universities, due to their exemplary status in Chinese higher education, and their orientation towards research and internationalisation (Ma 2007). In total, 149 full-text incentive scheme documents were collected online from March to May 2016,

through searching the official websites of 116 universities. An additional 23 incentive documents were collected during fieldwork in China between September 2016 and May 2017. Documents collected in the study formed an extensive dataset. However, we acknowledged its limitation in coverage, as some documents may not be published or found online.

Incentive documents were analysed through a descriptive mapping and thematic analysis of their content, including factual information like the bonus values and major themes such as the authorship requirement.

Interviews with six senior administrators, who had participated in formulating university-level incentives schemes at six case universities in China, added insights to the analysis. Three case universities were '985' universities and three were '211' universities. Three are strong in HSS and three are NS-oriented. '985' and '211' universities tend to be unevenly distributed in China, with 60% of '211' universities and 72% of '985' universities located in eastern China (Montgomery 2016). To capture this variation, the study selected two cases in northern China (Uni-N1, Uni-N2), two in eastern China (Uni-E1, Uni-E2), one in central China (Uni-C), and one in western China (Uni-W). Four universities published their first incentive policies before 2010, while the other two after 2010. The number of SSCI and A&HCI publications varied: more than 2000 at two universities, 1000-2000 for one, and less than 1000 for the other three.

Interviews with four journal editors in China of HSS academic journals, including SSCI, A&HCI, and CSSCI (Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index) journals, served to triangulate the senior administrators' perspectives. Three of the journal editors also served in academic roles at Chinese universities.

All interview data were transcribed and analysed in Chinese by one Chinese-speaking researcher through three rounds of coding: open coding, pattern coding, and a final phase of clustering, comparing, building logical connections between codes and generating themes (Saldaña 2015). To check the reliability of the main coder, two information-rich interview transcripts were translated into English. Three team members, all English-speakers, coded them respectively, compared codes, and found there was an overall agreement on the main coder's coding. Researchers used the back-translation strategy to validate the translation (Brislin 1970), and referred to government websites, university websites, and English-medium publications to improve the accuracy. This research has been approved by the researchers' university's ethics committee and has been conducted with full ethical considerations.

Incentives for HSS international publications: A national landscape

The analysis of incentive documents revealed that 84 out of the 116 universities had published university-level incentive schemes for HSS international publications in 2016. Additionally, five universities had incentive schemes only at the departmental level. The schemes were unevenly distributed by region, and included no universities in Tibet, Qinghai, Yunnan, Ningxia, Jiangxi, and Henan. In contrast, Beijing, Jiangsu, and Shanghai had 19, 10, and nine universities with incentive schemes, out of the 26, 11, and 10 '985' and '211' universities located in each city.

Figure 1 displays the publication year of university-level incentives, starting from the first incentive scheme available online in 2001. The annual number of incentive schemes published from 2001 to 2005 was relatively low compared to the rapid increase from 2006 to 2009 and 2011 to 2013, which coincided with the publication of important national policies for the internationalisation of HSS in 2006 and 2011 (Ministry of Education 2006; Ministry

of Education and Ministry of Finance 2011; National Planning Committee of Philosophy and Social Sciences 2006, 2011; Ministry of Education 2011a).

Figure 1 Publication Years of Incentive Documents

Types of Incentives

Incentives for HSS international publications could be placed into two categories: monetary incentives and career-related incentives. Monetary incentives encouraged HSS academics to publish in internationally-indexed journals by providing them with cash rewards or research funding. Career-related incentives emphasised international publications in the research evaluation of HSS academics.

Of the two types of incentives, monetary incentives appeared more visibly in specific bonus schemes, whereas career-related incentives were scattered throughout other types of documents such as employment advertisements, and promotion regulations. In interviews, senior administrators focused on the monetary incentive schemes, which appeared to them as more tangible. However, the editors, as academics, focused on the career-related incentives, considering them as a significant driver for academics to publish internationally.

Types of documents

The incentive documents collected ranged from explicit incentives such as ‘Bonus schemes for international publications’, to indirect incentives linked to job contracts, tenure regulations, or research evaluation regulations. The 172 incentive documents were categorised into six groups:

1. Bonus schemes for research achievements, highlighting SSCI and A&HCI papers among other research achievements;
2. Bonus schemes for ‘outstanding’ academic paper publications, focusing on SSCI and A&HCI publications;
3. Regulations on academic evaluations, entailing preferences for SSCI and A&HCI publication among various research outputs;
4. Journal lists, where SSCI, A&HCI journals were listed as ‘first-class’ core journals;
5. Promotion requirements, where SSCI/A&HCI publications were given greater weighting than other publications;
6. Employment documents, where greater weight was given to SSCI/A&HCI publications in job eligibility requirements.

The bonus schemes attached to ‘research achievements’ covered several kinds of research outputs, such as funded projects, national awards, patents, and book publications, but publications in SSCI and A&HCI journals attracted greater sums of money. For instance, *Nanjing University Bonus Schemes for HSS Research Achievements* marked SSCI and A&HCI publications, along with publications in *Social Sciences in China*, as the highest-level of achievement, thereby attracting the highest bonuses of ¥3,000. In contrast, publications in top Chinese journals were only rewarded ¥200–¥1,000 (¥1,000 is approximately £112).

Bonus schemes for academic paper publications offered awards to ‘outstanding’ academic papers, which had to be published in certain journals. For example, the *Peking University Interim Bonus Schemes for HSS International Publications* rewarded SSCI, A&HCI and SCI publications with ¥4,000–¥6,000, with other publications not rewarded.

Regulations on academic evaluations included guidance for assessing academics’ workload according to a point system for teaching, research output, and social services. In these systems, international publications were often associated with greater weight. For instance, Lanzhou University’s incentive document provided each SSCI and A&HCI publication with 40 points, while other publications were worth 1 to 15 points, depending on the ranking of the journal.

Journal lists served as reference points for bonus schemes and research evaluations. In most HSS journal lists, ‘SSCI and A&HCI journals’ was used as a single concept, and most highly ranked. Almost all domestic journals ranked lower than the SSCI and A&HCI journals, except for *Social Sciences in China* (Chinese edition and English edition), which consistently ranked at the top of the journal list, with bonuses or points similar to SSCI and A&HCI papers. These journal lists were updated every few years.

Promotion requirements stipulated research outputs for tenure application. For example, in Xidian University’s regulations in 2014, academics needed at least one SSCI/A&HCI publication (or two CSSCI publications) for teaching and research roles, or at least one SSCI/A&HCI publication (or four CSSCI publications) for research-oriented roles. This indicated a 4:1 value ratio placed on internationally-indexed journals.

Employment documents included both job advertisements and employment contracts, containing requirements for academics to have a certain number of SSCI/A&HCI publications, either before application or after being recruited. For instance, in Beijing Jiaotong University’s job advertisement in 2016, it was required that applicants for the Lecturer position should have at least seven CSSCI publications or one SSCI/A&HCI publication, indicating a 7:1 value ratio.

Rankings of publications

Incentive documents focused predominantly on SSCI and A&HCI journals, selected domestic journals (such as *Social Sciences in China* and CSSCI journals), and to a far lesser extent selected non-SSCI and non-A&HCI international journals. 14 of the 84 universities with incentive schemes used Impact Factor, quartile rankings, or their own journal lists to further categorise SSCI and A&HCI journals and rewarded them accordingly. Some universities had differentiated lower rewards for publications in domestically-based SSCI/A&HCI journals and higher awards in internationally-based SSCI/A&HCI journals. For instance, the University of International Business and Economics regulated in 2009 that each article published in SSCI, SCI, EI, and A&HCI journals would be rewarded ¥10,000, providing the journals were also published outside China. Comparably, the bonuses for publications in journals published in China but indexed by the abovementioned indices were only ¥7,000.

One significant impact of incentives was that all four journal editors interviewed prioritised SSCI listing in their goals for their journal, as illustrated by Editor-2: ‘We hope to get recognised quickly by the international academic community. ... We certainly hope that this journal could become an SSCI journal through our efforts’. Another editor of a newly established English-medium journal described their ‘embarrassing situation’ as a non-SSCI journal (Editor-3):

Chinese academics may not look at our journal, because it is not indexed by SSCI. ... Our journal has to become an SSCI journal, so that we can have better sources of contributions. We do not have many domestic contributors yet.

Editor-4 from an SSCI journal reported an increase in the quality and quantity of submissions after the journal became indexed, thus corroborating Editor-3’s observations.

The value of monetary bonuses

Among the 172 incentive documents collected, 94 documents had provisions for giving monetary bonuses for SSCI publications, 78 documents provided monetary bonuses for A&HCI publications, and 61 documents offered bonuses for publications in Chinese HSS journals. Among them, 54 also offered special bonuses for publications in *Nature* and *Science*, and 59 provided bonuses for SCI publications. The bonus value varied between publications in different types of journals: SSCI and A&HCI publications, CSSCI publications, and SCI publications. Within each category, there were two ways of regulating the value of bonuses: one offered a fixed value, meaning each publication in journals from the same category received a fixed amount of money; the other gave flexible bonuses, where the value changed according to the journal’s impact factor, rankings, or other criteria. Bonuses were granted in forms of cash rewards and/or research funding. Table 1 summarises the bonus values for different types of publications.

Table 1 Bonus Values for Different Types of Publication

Journals	Number of incentive documents	Number of documents with fixed value	Maximum value (¥)	Minimum value (¥)	Popular bonus value (¥) and frequency
SSCI	94	69	200,000	300	10,000 (26 documents) 5,000 (25 documents)
A&HCI	78	64	200,000	300	5,000 (20 documents) 10,000 (14 documents)
<i>Social Sciences in China</i>	37	37	80,000	1,000	10,000 (9 documents) 20,000 (8 documents)
Other Chinese journals	61	14	50,000	200	1,000 (19 documents) 2,000 (13 documents)
<i>Nature</i> and <i>Science</i>	54	54	1,000,000	50,000	100,000 (13 documents) 200,000 (11 documents)
SCI publications	59	8	150,000	300	10,000 (12 documents) 20,000 (7 documents)

Among the 94 and 78 documents providing monetary rewards for SSCI and A&HCI publications respectively, 69 and 64 documents reported a fixed bonus value for each

publication, ranging from ¥300 to ¥200,000. The most common bonus value for an SSCI publication was ¥10,000 (appearing in 26 documents). Fewer documents offered ¥10,000 to A&HCI publications (14 in total), with ¥5,000 the more common value (20 documents). The highest bonus value for both journal types (¥200,000) was offered by Wuhan University in 2011 for articles published in the journals with the highest impact factor in each discipline. Many incentive schemes gave special status to the domestic publication, *Social Sciences in China* (English and Chinese Editions), which is published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and is not indexed by the SSCI or A&HCI. Thirty-seven documents had specific bonuses for publications in this journal, with 78 percent offering a bonus value less than or equal to ¥20,000.

Generally, SSCI publications were more valued than A&HCI publications in monetary rewards. Only one university gave higher bonuses to A&HCI articles, whereas 13 placed a higher value on SSCI articles than A&HCI articles, and a further 14 universities only gave bonuses to SSCI articles. Senior administrators' explanation for this situation was that SSCI 'seems to be more internationally recognised' (Uni-W), and that 'SSCI has higher standards than A&HCI when selecting journals' (Uni-C).

Only 14 schemes provided fixed-value bonuses for other Chinese journals. Their bonuses were much lower, ranging from ¥300 to ¥1,000 according to the journal list rankings. Interviews with senior administrators revealed a view that SSCI and A&HCI were more rigorous, of higher quality, and attracted a larger impact than most domestic publications. The administrator from Uni-N2, for example, argued that offering international publications more bonuses and higher status in career progression would encourage academics to improve their research capacity.

Publications in non-SSCI/A&HCI international journals were not valued. The senior administrator from Uni-C stated that SSCI and A&HCI were convenient and objective tools to evaluate the quality of a journal publication, and if a journal was not indexed by either, it proved difficult to make judgements about the quality of its publications.

Bonuses for NS and SCI publications were invariably higher than those for HSS publications. The minimum bonus value for a paper published in *Nature* or *Science* was ¥50,000, and the highest value was ¥10,000, with popular bonus values of ¥100,000 (in 13 documents), ¥200,000 (in 11 documents), and ¥500,000 (in 9 documents). The highest bonus value for an SCI paper was ¥150,000, and the most common maximum rewards were ¥10,000 and ¥20,000. Administrators from Uni-N2 and Uni-C explained that part of the bonuses was provided in the form of research funding rather than as personal income, and since NS research generally required larger research funding than HSS, they proposed it was fair to provide higher bonuses for NS research.

The requirement for the first author

All incentive schemes emphasised that for a publication to qualify in bonus schemes, research evaluations, and job promotions, the university should be listed as the first author's institution. Interviews with senior administrators from Uni-N1 and Uni-W revealed an assumption that first authors had played the most pivotal role in generating the publication. For senior administrators from Uni-W and Uni-C, this decision was due to some ranking systems only counting first-author publications. The senior administrator from Uni-C remarked that 'many national and international evaluations and rankings are only counting the first authors... we have to follow the rules to play the game'.

The value of bonuses also changed depending on whether an author was the first author or corresponding author of the article. The highest value of bonuses was given to the first author, and other authors sometimes received a lower amount. For instance, as displayed in Table 2, Peking University regulated in 2009 that only the first or the corresponding author

could get the full bonus amount. The first or corresponding author is then responsible for negotiating with other authors from Peking University how to share the bonuses according to their contributions.

Table 2 Peking University's Regulation on Bonuses' Distribution

Condition	Bonuses
The 1 st author or the corresponding author is from Peking University	100% (to share with the following authors from Peking University)
The 2 nd author is from Peking University	80% (to share with the following authors from Peking University)
The 3 rd author is from Peking University	50% (to share with the following authors from Peking University)
The 4 th or 5 th ... author is from Peking University	0%

Making incentives for HSS international publications: Institutional stories

Beyond a mapping of incentive schemes on the national level, the study further explores institutions' aims, policy-making processes, and rationales for revision, drawing on in-depth interviews with senior administrators at the six case study universities.

Institutional aims

Interviews with senior administrators highlighted four aspects of the shared rationale behind incentive schemes for HSS international publications: responding to national policies, promoting internationalisation, facilitating HSS research, and fulfilling performative goals. The senior administrator from Uni-C emphasised that the university's incentive scheme for HSS international publications was 'initiated as a response to the national going-out policy', and that it was 'an essential way for us to improve the quality of HSS research and enhance impact both nationally and internationally'. The senior administrator from Uni-E1 also stated that incentivising international publications was integral to the university's mission to become a 'world-class university':

Encouraging academics to publish internationally is one of the most important approaches to internationalisation. We would like to guide academics, push them, or even 'force' them to publish internationally.

All of the six institutional policymakers believed that incentivising SSCI and A&HCI publications could increase academics' awareness of internationalisation, and thus that it was beneficial to academics with the capability to get involved in international cooperation and knowledge exchange. This view was shared by a journal editor, who stated that publishing internationally would help Chinese academics 'to become recognised and accepted internationally' (Editor-4).

The interviews also revealed performance-based rationale such as enhancing the institution's ranking within league tables, as expressed by the senior administrator from Uni-W: 'We initiated our incentives for HSS international publications because we would like to enhance our performance in the ranking of ESI (Essential Science Indicators, a ranking based on citation counts derived from SCIE, SSCI and A&HCI journals) and to improve our impact.' He further explained that since ESI only counted publications and citations and is discipline-based, it was regarded by the university leadership as an effective and authoritative bibliometric tool to benchmark the institutions' research performance. The same administrator noted a goal for social sciences disciplines to 'eventually reach the world top 1% on the ESI ranking'. All

six senior administrators agreed that incentivising international publications could contribute to improving their institutions' reputation and performance in international and national league tables, indicating a connection perceived by senior administrations between incentive schemes and rankings.

The policy-making process

Interviews with senior administrators revealed three approaches to formulating incentive documents: the authoritative model, the top-down model, and the bottom-up model. The authoritative model featured a centralised decision-making mechanism by the universities' authorities, as employed by Uni-N1, Uni-E2, and Uni-C. At the three institutions, incentive documents were drafted by responsible offices and reviewed by other relevant offices and university leadership. Sometimes, university leaders sought advice from a panel of experts, such as reported by one administrator (Uni-E2). At both Uni-E2 and Uni-C, senior administrators also considered the presidents' judgements as vital in formulating the incentive documents.

The top-down model began similarly to the authoritative model, but then engaged a larger pool of academics. Both Uni-N2 and Uni-W applied this model, in which draft documents were first proposed by the university office and reviewed by relevant university leaders, before being circulated within the university for feedback from academics. Based on the feedback, the university office then adjusted and finalised the incentive document. The administrator at Uni-W reported that it took two years to gather the comments and revise the incentives document accordingly.

The bottom-up model started with suggestions on individual and departmental levels, which were later integrated by university offices to formulate the policy. The administrator at Uni-E1 described the process of compiling lists of journal rankings: journal rankings were first proposed by each department's academic committee, then reviewed by the university's academic committee, and finally adjusted and published by the responsible office.

All of the six senior administrators stated that they had studied the incentive documents of other universities when drafting their own, and had adopted some of the provisions into their own incentive schemes. For instance, when asked about the requirement for first-author publications, the first reason provided by Uni-C administrator was: 'That is what other universities do. We see they are all doing this'. The senior administrators also reported a tendency to learn from universities similar to their own: 'When we initiated the incentive scheme, we first studied the incentive documents from universities with similar characteristics to us, such as other NS-oriented universities' (Uni-N2). Thus, even though the policy making processes differed across the universities, institutional isomorphism through borrowing policy elements from other universities may have been instrumental in establishing a status quo across the schemes.

Revising incentive schemes

Among the 84 universities with incentive schemes for HSS international publications, 31 of them had revised their incentive schemes at least once since they were first issued. They added more specific requirements, changed the bonus value, or changed the incentive schemes completely. Among the 31 universities, 15 increased the bonus value for international publications. Major revisions of incentives reflected important shifts in institutions' agenda, such as the increased status of HSS research and the emphasis on research quality.

Uni-N2, for example, made adjustments to the Impact Factor thresholds because institutional policymakers realised that SSCI journals tended to have lower Impact Factors than journals in the SCI. The senior administrator from Uni-N2 further emphasised two

significant changes: one was to dedicate a separate section to HSS research achievements, and the other one was to boost the bonuses for international publications, including those in HSS. Although the bonuses for HSS international publications were not increased as much as those for NS papers, the senior administrator underlined the importance of such ‘breakthroughs’: ‘It is an important signal to demonstrate that our university values HSS research, and that we encourage HSS academics to publish important outputs on important platforms’ (Uni-N2). Senior administrators from Uni-E1 and Uni-W, the other two NS-oriented universities, also expressed a similar intention to encourage the development of HSS by incentivising HSS research outputs, as illustrated by the administrator from Uni-W:

We are traditionally renowned for our NS research. We are incredibly competitive in our performance of the NS research. However, the performance of our HSS research is not as good as the NS. Therefore, we have been putting much more effort to encourage the development of HSS disciplines.

Another type of revision signalled the institutions’ intention to emphasise high-quality research. Uni-C had raised the thresholds for rewarding SSCI publications twice. The first time was when senior administrators found that certain disciplines, such as psychology, had far more SSCI publications than other disciplines. However, they later discovered that most of them were in conference proceedings indexed by the SSCI, which ‘cannot be equal to journal publications’ (Uni-C). Uni-C thereby published a revised incentive document in 2013, which categorised SSCI journals into four tiers based on quartile rankings. In 2016, the university made a second revision to exclude publications in the third and fourth tiers of SSCI journals from bonuses, whereas the bonus value for publications in the first and second tiers was increased. The senior administrator attributed the revision to an increase notion of quality over quantity:

The university is concerned not only with the number of publications, but also the quality. It is not just about numbers. Instead, we value the quality of research and welcome high-quality publications.

Similarly, another senior administrator said that Uni-E1 was also aware of the need to reward SSCI publications according to the journal’s quality, since ‘not all SSCI journals are good journals ... some of the international journals are not even comparable to domestic journals’. However, no revision was made so far, and the senior administrator explained that: ‘Policies should not be changed too frequently. ... However, I think we will definitely create categories for SSCI journals in our next revision’.

Discussion

The ‘going-out’ of HSS through incentive schemes

This study identified a large number of Chinese universities with incentive schemes for HSS international publications. Incentive documents and interviews with senior administrators suggested an emphasis on exporting research by publishing in internationally-indexed journals, together with a willingness to enhance Chinese HSS research to a ‘world-class’ level. Major peaks of institutional incentive documents also corresponded to the publications of important national policies for the internationalisation of HSS. The outward-facing internationalisation strategy and practices showcase the influence of the national ‘going-out’ discourse, with a shift from one-way learning to exporting and enhancing China’s HSS in the world (Ministry of Education 2011a).

However, the study suggested a mixture of a ‘going-out’ in theory with ‘borrowing-from-the-west’ in practice. While publications in domestic journals were classified into different tiers in the incentive schemes, publications in SSCI journals were not further differentiated by many universities. Senior administrators and journal editors interviewed preferred journals indexed by SSCI, an index challenged for its limited geographical, linguistic, and disciplinary coverage (Archambault et al. 2006). Senior administrators also associated the incentive schemes with performative goals to increase their institutions’ rankings in global league tables, which employed the number and citation of publications in certain internationally-indexed journals as essential indicators (L. Li 2009; Hazelkorn 2015). This mixture of ‘going-out’ with ‘borrowing-from-the-west’ may result in an over-emphasis on ‘international’ or often ‘western’ standards in Chinese HSS academia, echoing the concerns of some scholars (Deng 2010).

The wide-spread ‘borrowing-from-the-west’ practices may be explained by organisational isomorphism through mimetic processes and competition mechanisms (Beckert 2010; DiMaggio and Powell 1983). In the study, the institutional isomorphism among Chinese universities is exemplified by a high similarity in regulations, such as the same requirement for the first-authorship and the almost identical ranking order of publications. The cause of such isomorphism, as explained by senior administrators, was that they had imitated other institutions’ incentive schemes, with the intention to increase their own competitiveness in rankings. The imitation practices may homogenise universities in their attempt to internationalise HSS, and cement the current research system shaped by western standards and benchmarking. However, different voices also emerged from administrator interviews, such as a re-consideration of current ranking orders for HSS publications and the tendency to value quality over quantity in their revisions of incentive schemes. Independent institutional decisions like this may contribute to a divergence from current institutional isomorphism in the future.

The ‘Matthew Effect’ in HSS publishing

The results of documentary analysis revealed a clear pecking order of publications used for monetary and career-related incentives at the case universities. There was a clear focus on SSCI and A&HCI journals, at the top of the hierarchy, with the *Social Sciences in China* journal joining these journals in the top tier. Where distinctions were made between the social sciences and humanities, SSCI journals were placed in a more prestigious position than A&HCI journals. Administrators’ perception of SSCI having higher inclusion standards may due to the fact that SSCI indexes journals based on quantitative indicators like citation numbers, while journals indexed by A&HCI are handpicked by editors and indexing staff, rendering a degree of subjectivity (V.-H. Lee, Hew & Loke 2018). However, administrators may fail to acknowledge that such subjectivity is a result of the specific culture of HSS, which emphasises citations and publication in non-journal formats; and this, in consequence, calls for discipline-specific evaluation criteria (Engels, Ossenblok, and Spruyt 2012; V.-H. Lee, Hew, and Loke 2018).

Compared with SSCI and A&HCI journals, domestic journals always attracted a far lesser sum of incentives, and were often further categorised according to some type of domestic ranking criteria, with low-ranking journals at the bottom of the pecking order. Such results may be consistent with prior observations of Chinese academia’s ‘worshipping’ of SSCI and A&HCI journals (C. Li and Lyu 2015, p. 173), which may be detrimental to domestic journals.

These incentive schemes may lead to a ‘Matthew effect’ in terms of promoting a cycle of journal prestige, whereby an increased attraction through institutional incentives

strengthens the ability of SSCI & A&HCI journals to reproduce their reputation. This cycle (illustrated in Figure 2) was supported by accounts of senior administrators and journal editors and by previous research of incentive schemes in the NS, which saw that incentives led to increased submissions to top journals (Franzoni, Scellato, and Stephan, 2011). Under the current incentive system, it could become difficult for journals outside of incentive schemes to attract submissions from scholars, and especially so for domestic journals and international journals not indexed by SSCI/A&HCI. This view was shared by journal editors interviewed, who were all determined to index their journals within the SSCI, and who also noted an increase in the quality of submissions after becoming indexed. Consequently, incentivised journals may keep flourishing due to good-quality submissions, while others not in these schemes could potentially wither, as had been observed in the Korean context (Shin 2007).

Figure 2 Possible Cycle of SSCI/A&HCI Prestige

Conclusion

This study found that 84 out of 116 research-intensive universities in China actively promoted HSS international publications with incentive schemes. Those schemes had variations and similarities in their aims, the level of benefits, specific requirements, and policy-making models, with some institutions borrowed regulations from other universities. Findings suggested the higher prestige of SSCI and A&HCI journal publications in the HSS, represented by their higher weighting in monetary and career-related incentive schemes. The incentive schemes for international publications showcased the influence of western standards and global benchmarking on the ‘going-out’ of Chinese HSS. In addition, we argue that those incentive schemes may create a ‘Matthew Effect’, which enables SSCI and A&HCI journals to flourish and deepens the divide between these and other journals.

Documentary analyses and interviews indicated that Chinese universities were constantly changing their incentive schemes. Further studies could thereby explore such changes and track their impact on research outputs, particularly under the newly-implemented national project ‘Double First-Class Programme’, which replaced ‘Project 985’ and ‘Project 211’ in Chinese higher education. Future research could also explore academics’ views on and reactions to those incentive schemes.

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