

Publish or pòmiè! Writing for publication in Chinese universities

Xiajing Chen, Ibrar Bhatt

Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

This paper is based on early phase data collection for a study which examines how Chinese academics are experiencing shifts in research writing, including how they are responding to performance mandates, (a lack of) institutional support, competitive culture, and varying forms of research evaluation. Utilising a social practice approach to literacy, alongside a sociomaterial perspective to writing, the study involves interviews and multimodal journaling with a cross-disciplinary sample of academics within HSS departments at 'Double First-Class' Chinese universities. Findings highlight that Chinese scholars must now incorporate new literacy practices in order to contend with diverse and conflicting demands on their time, abilities, and allegiances, including a double-bind of 'local' vs 'international' research impact. We therefore use the Mandarin term pòmiè () to describe the research writing predicament of many of our participants: To be either 'broken' from over work, or 'annihilated' and forced out of work.

Full paper

Policy and expectation in Chinese Higher Education

Following research writing incentivisation policies in place for the natural sciences since the 1980s, the Chinese government has more

recently stipulated directives to improve the quality and quantity of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) publications emerging from the country's 2,631 universities (see Xu et al 2019; Xu et al 2021). While these HSS productivity directives apply, theoretically, to all Chinese universities, research activity is mostly concentrated within the 597 universities regarded as 'top tier' which thereby absorb most research-related government funding. This is in line with increases in funding as part of drives for universities to attain 'world class' status (see MoE 2017) and a stipulation that Chinese academics should manage their own research writing agenda through, among other things, increased use of publishing in top-ranking international journals. While some incentivisation schemes have been dropped to allow more room for staff to teach, and for academics to publish a component of all their outputs in domestic Chinese journals (see MoE 2020a; MoE 2020b), the pressure to publish in high-ranking and international – which usually means English medium – journals still remains an important part of promotions and prestige, and thereby retains a central place in Chinese academic professional life. Importantly, this pressure carries alongside it the domination of Western forms of genre and research writing conventions in everyday academic literacy. Therefore, in this paper, we turn to China as an important case for how literacy is changing for early-career research writers in HSS, and how literacy transformations are driven by the need to join the anglophone publishing 'centre'.

A project with academics in China

Building on the kind of research that was conducted by Tusting et al (2019), this research uses a 'social practice' approach to literacy and sociomateriality as complementary theoretical frames. We draw from a cross-disciplinary sample of early-career academics employed at a cross-section of Chinese universities to investigate the specific features of how knowledge is produced through changing research writing practices. The project adopts repeat interviews and multimodal journaling to examine: How Chinese academics are learning to write as academics; how digital media shape writing practices; the role of doctoral training as an apprenticeship; and how scholarly identities are produced and shaped by new literacy practices. The therefore study fills a key gap in the HE knowledge

base on how shifts in HE, including managerialism and productivity mandates, are creating a new set of expectations on Chinese academics.

Changing cultures of writing

Whilst this paper reports on early phase data, the research nonetheless provides an account of the ways in which Chinese academics respond to incentives for both domestic and international publications and the subsequent deeper impact on their everyday research writing culture – and literacy practices – in Chinese HSS. Policymakers and university managers are placing greater demands on academics to do more work while maintaining their current teaching loads, which has resulted in an increase in the amount of writing required of them. According to our findings, academic knowledge generation in China is not only driven by research activities, but also by concomitant networking and collaboration activities. All of these necessitate new literacy practices as part of scholarly work. Aside from English academic literacy, academics must also deal with an increasing administrative and bureaucratic burden, which, in turn, limits exposure to English academic literacy and international networking. In addition, training opportunities and access to academic resources for writing are limited and vary across institutions. As a result, it is difficult to argue that academics in China merely need to learn the academic literacy that is commonly employed in the anglophone centre for their publication efforts. Rather, what we argue is that, as multilingual scholars, being 'productive' means amalgamating new literacy practices with multiple and conflicting demands on time, abilities, and an often double-bind of local/regional/national versus 'international' research impact.

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