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ARTICLE

Chinese Journals' Chief Editors Should Enhance Their Response Rate to Authors

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ABSTRACT

Chief editors are the souls of journals, and can guarantee a journal's success by enhancing the efficiency of the manuscript submission and publication process through promptness and speedy response rates to authors. In this study, a total of 867 international journals—indexed by Science Citation Index, Social Sciences Citation Index, and Arts & Humanities Citation Index, and 567 Chinese journals—indexed by Chinese Science Citation Database and Chinese Social Science Citation Information database, were randomly selected to explore whether significant differences in the response rate and speed exist between chief editors.639 chief editors' email addresses were obtained for the international journals, whereas 357 email addresses were gathered for the Chinese journals. However, due to mail servers, only 274 international and 330 Chinese editors were successfully contacted. All messages contained a questionnaire geared to determine the total length of time required for the manuscript submission and publication process. After two months, a 100% response rate was achieved for international chief editors, while Chinese chief editors had a significantly lower rate ($P < 0.01$) of 30.6%. Nevertheless, for both international and Chinese chief editors, 66% and 58% provided a response within 12 hours, respectively. Although several reasons exist for the Chinese journals' lagging behind international journals, this study demonstrates that the response rate of chief editors to authors may also be a contributing factor. Thus, chief editors of Chinese journals should enhance their response rate to improve the current situation and further contribute to Chinese journals' success.

1. Introduction

In recent years, China has allocated extensive human, material, and financial resources to scientific research[1]; however, despite substantial investments, only 148 of 6000 Chinese journals published in English were listed in the Journal Incitation Reports (JCR) published by Thomson Reuters. Furthermore, a limited number of these journals have achieved high international influence when compared to journals published in the United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK)[2-6].As a result, researchers are heavily inclined to publish their work in the latter international journals[7], particularly those indexed by Science Citation Index (SCI), Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), and Arts & Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI).

In addition to international exposure, researchers are further motivated to publish in international journals giv-

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en: (*i*) their wish to strengthen academic exchanges and enhance international influences driven by academic internationalization; (*ii*) the promotional and reputational needs of Chinese universities (colleges) and research institutions as shaped by the range of impact of their publications; (*iii*) the lack of integration between disciplines which limits publication options and exposure for cross-disciplinary research; and (*iv*) the high fees charged for publication in Chinese journals which exceed many authors' ability to pay[8-14]. As a result, many researchers choose to incur the high international journal fees, despite potential low impact factors, to gain international recognition within their fields. Additionally, many international journals provide free publication, and have accordingly gained traction and attracted many authors. Moreover, the attitudes of editors, especially chief editors (CEs), also play an important role in attracting authors to a journal[15]. Therefore, it is essential to understand whether a difference exists between the attitudes of international and Chinese CEs, including response speed and rate, to provide effective recommendations to ensure journal success.

2. Research Methods

2.1 Selection of Journals

The international journals surveyed were drawn from the Science Citation Index (SCI), Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), and Arts & Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI) listed in 2015, whereas Chinese journals were garnered from the Chinese Science Citation Database (CSCD) and Chinese Social Science Citation Information (CSSCI) database. Given the large number of available international and Chinese journals, 10% and 33%, respectively, were selected using a random sampling method. Impact factors, number of annual issues, and number of papers published of the journals selected are presented in Table 1. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was applied to determine the statistically significant differences. The least-significant-difference (LSD) test was used to compare the means of variables when the results of ANOVA were significant at $P < 0.05$. The geographic distribution of the international journals selected for this study is presented in Fig. 1.

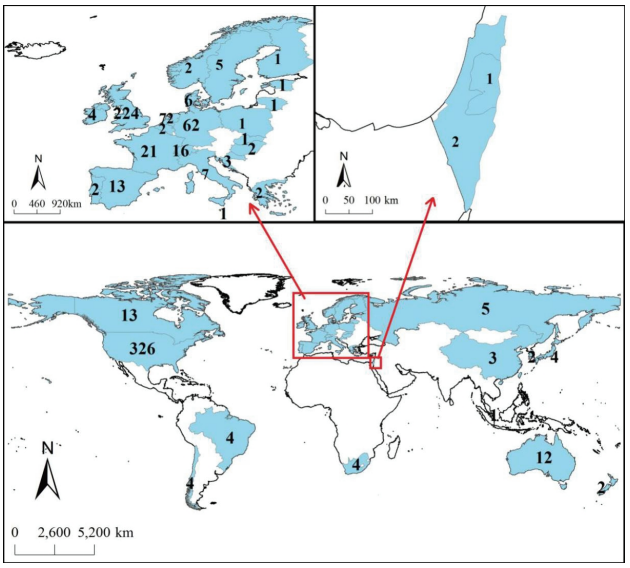

Figure 1. The distribution of journal(s) from selected countries

2.2 Collection of CE Response Data

Following the selection of journals, an email was sent to each respective CE with the following question: "How long does one manuscript take from submission to publication? ".The email periods allocated for international and

Table 1. Information of selected journals from three international databases and two Chinese databases

Database	International Journal				Chinese Journal		
	SCI	SSCI	A&HCI	Total	CSCD	CSSCI	Total
Total	3786	3125	1758	8669	1200	533	1733
Selected	379	312	176	867	393	174	567
Number of annual issues	10.6 a	5.3b	3.3c		8a	10b	
Mean	7.4A				8.8B		
Impact factor	3.31b	1.20a	0.62a		0.75a	0.85b	
Mean		2.30A			0.79B		
Annual papers	197b	54a	72a		223a	254b	
Mean	138A				235B		

Note: Lowercase letters indicate significant differences (P<0.05) in number of annual issues, impact factors, and annual papers of journals among the three international databases and two Chinese databases. Different capital letters symbolize significant differences (P<0.05) in measured variables between international journals and Chinese journals.

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Chinese CEs were between July 2nd–September 2nd, 2017 and June 14th–August 14th, 2017, respectively.

3. Results

The emails of 74% (639 out of 867) of international and 63% (357 out of 567) of Chinese journals were obtained by various channels; however, only 274 and 330 emails were sent successfully for international and Chinese journals, respectively. The remainder of emails experienced delivery failures identified through mailer-daemon notices. Nevertheless, the distribution for successful email delivery is represented in Fig. 2 below. For the successfully delivered emails, the international and Chinese journals had 100% and 30.6% response rate, respectively, indicating a significant difference between these two ($p < 0.01$). For emails to which CEs provided a response, the response time was determined (Table 2). Based on the responses received, 66.06% of international and 58.25% (no significant difference, $P > 0.05$) of Chinese CEs provided a response within 12 hours. After a 24-hour time period, the response rate for both international and Chinese CE sharply declined. Nonetheless, little difference was observed in the response speeds between international and Chinese journal CEs.

Table 2. Recorded time of response for emails sent to and received by chief editors of international and Chinese journals

Type of chief editor	12 hours	24 hours	3-5days	6-10days	>10days
International journal	66.06	16.42	14.23	1.83	1.46
Chinese journal	58.25	28.16	9.70	2.91	0.98

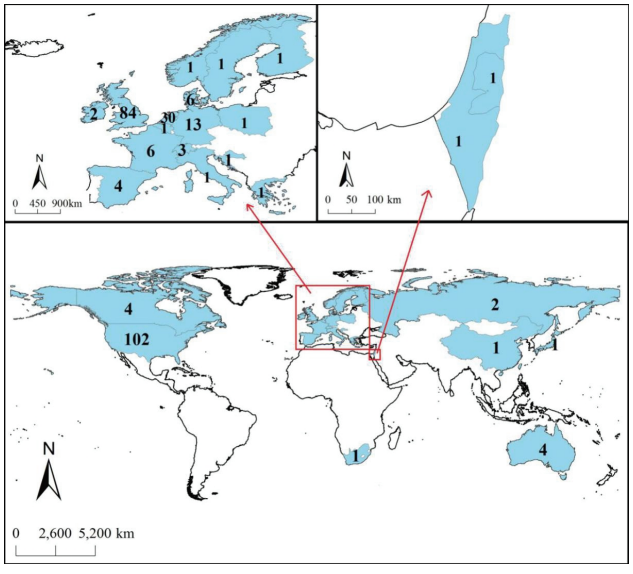

Figure 2. Final distribution international journals having responded to the investigators' emails.

4. Discussion

Chinese journals lagged in terms of response rates when compared to international journals, especially those headquartered in the US and UK[4,6,8].While this study presents a number of acceptable reasons for Chinese journals' limitations, it demonstrates that CEs' response to authors is a defining factor in the success of journals. The response rate for international CEs was significantly higher (approximately 70%) than Chinese CEs. Although other factors exist (shown in Table 1—impact factor, number of annual issues and annual papers) and are different between the two types of journals, statistical analysis indicated that these factors had no effect ($P > 0.05$) on email response rates. Therefore, in this case, CEs' individual behavior becomes a determinant factor for the rate of response to authors.

As an academic leader and steward, CEs bear an important role which includes building a journal's reputation through independent efforts[16,17]. These efforts include common responsibilities such as communication with authors, evaluation of manuscripts, manuscript review and communication with reviewers[16,18]. However, no supervision exists to ensure that the manuscript submission and publication process is efficient. The work is therefore dependent on the enthusiasm and motivation level the CE has for the work performed. For this reason, and based on the data collected, it could be stated that international journal CEs are more devoted to their role than CEs for Chinese journals. Furthermore, an additional reason for lower rates observed for the Chinese journals can be attributed to the fact that communication can be achieved directly by phone. This results in a lack of effective email communication driven by numerous Chinese journal CEs ignoring or taking emails for granted.

Nonetheless, although low response rates from Chinese CEs were determined, the response time (within 5 days) for the two types of journals was similar, suggesting equal enthusiasm from those whom responded. Therefore, if response promptness is maintained, the quality of the Chinese journal could greatly improve and guarantee success. In addition, the creation of new Chinese international journals could further attract authors in diverse fields. For example, in past decades, successful Chinese journals, such as Chinese Science Bulletin, Geography Journal, and Journal of Mountain Research, were internationalized through translation and the creation of English versions to reach a broader audience. This could be replicated with new journals as well.

5. Conclusion

CEs' response rate to authors of international journals

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were significantly higher than those of Chinese journals; however, response speed between these two types of journals were found to be similar. The response rates of CEs were not related to publication factors of journals, but rather depended on CEs' individual behavior. CEs of Chinese journals should be aware that this limitation greatly contributes to the failures and successes of journals. Therefore, they should strengthen commitment to their responsibilities to ensure responses are provided to authors. As more open access journals are created by international publishers, Chinese journals must continue to develop and improve to remain competitive. For this reason, CEs must attract the better contribution sources as authors can be considered the "gods" of journals.

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