

# Publish or Perish: The Dark World of Chinese Academic Publishing

Many Chinese doctorate students can't graduate until they publish articles in academic journals — a demand that pushes many into corruption.

## [Sixth Tone](#)

*This article is part one in a series on Chinese academic publishing. Read part two [here](#).*

SHANGHAI — With his bookish personality and encyclopedic knowledge of contemporary Chinese poetry, 28-year-old doctorate student Zhou should be a shoo-in for a job in academia. But as his final year progresses, he is increasingly concerned about his future. "I'm under so much pressure to publish my papers," he sighed, adding that he often works late into the night. "I don't even have time to write my own poems anymore."

Zhou — who declined to use his real name for fear that it would affect his future career — has China's demanding research industry and complex academic-journal system to thank for his sleepless nights. In the Western academic tradition, it is customary for most doctorate students to spend several years writing a single thesis, defend it under the scrutiny of university professors, and graduate upon receiving academic approval. But almost all Chinese universities demand that doctorate students publish multiple theses in recognized scholarly journals before they can graduate.

That's a problem for budding scholars like Zhou. China had an estimated [362,000](#) doctorate students last year, along with at least 1.6 million

advanced-degree holders working in academia. The country is also home to more than 5,000 journals, but most universities require doctoral students to publish their work in so-called C-list journals — a catalog of the country's 554 most reputable academic publications maintained by the Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI). Although journals appear with varying frequency — for example, some are monthly, others are quarterly — there is simply not enough space for everyone to publish their work. Doctorate students feel the squeeze most of all: Some are left unable to graduate, while others use corrupt methods to bring their manuscripts to print. Fan Jun, chief editor of the Journal of Central China Normal University, has [claimed](#) that C-list journals only have the space to publish around half of the liberal arts papers they receive.

In 2012, Zhou, who hails from a small town in central China's Hubei province, completed his undergraduate degree in Chinese literature at a second-tier university in the provincial capital of Wuhan. After a master's in the city of Chongqing, he returned to Wuhan in 2015 for a doctorate degree in Chinese literature at the well-regarded Huazhong University of Science and Technology. He hopes to eventually become a college lecturer.



Students study in a university library in Shenyang, Liaoning province, July 5, 2018. VCG

When Zhou started his doctorate program, he expected a rigorous intellectual workout. He knew that at Huazhong, doctoral students earn their degrees by publishing three papers in C-list journals. Zhou assumed that as long as he worked hard enough, he would naturally earn his recognition.

But so far, things haven't worked out the way he'd hoped. Zhou has only published one C-list paper, an analysis of the style of a 20th-century Chinese poet. Another journal has accepted his second manuscript, but refuses to give him a publication date. (A backlog at many journals means that even if a paper gets approved, writers sometimes have to wait up to

two years to see it in print.). “I’ve probably submitted those papers for review more than 50 times in the last four years,” he said, explaining that each paper took around a month to write and is around 12,000 Chinese characters long. His third paper, meanwhile, is still miles from completion. “This is far from satisfactory,” Zhou said.

*I’ve probably submitted those papers for review more than 50 times in the last four years.* Zhou is not the only doctorate student to bemoan China’s academic publishing industry. Six students interviewed by Sixth Tone for this article — all of whom attended different universities and requested various levels of anonymity to protect their academic careers — claimed that they and their peers were struggling to advance their careers due to unreasonable publishing requirements. One such student surnamed Zhao, who specializes in translation studies at Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU), said he has written eight different papers, which he has submitted to C-list journals at total of 30 times since 2015. Only one was published.

*- Zhou, doctoral student*

Zhao remains confident that he will graduate. He said that because BFSU is one of the few universities that does not demand doctoral students to publish in C-list journals, his motivation for targeting them stems from a desire to meet the job requirements of his dream university in southeastern China. But Zhao was an exception: Most students we spoke to feared that their colleges would defer their graduation dates if they failed to publish their work in time. “Last year, only one final-year doctorate student [out of 13] in my subject graduated, because they failed to publish two C-list theses,” said a second-year doctoral student in journalism and communication at Shanghai Jiao Tong University.



A graduation ceremony for doctorate students in Nanjing, Jiangsu province, June 30, 2018. Qin Huai/VCG

Generally, liberal arts students target the C-list journals more than science students, who tend to compete more often for spots in international publications. The situation is particularly bad for subjects like translation studies, which students say are underrepresented in domestic academic publishing. "If I want to get my work into a C-list journal, my choices are very limited," said Zhao, the Beijing-based doctorate student, adding that only around 10 journals in China accept translation-studies papers, and only one deals exclusively with the subject. By comparison, 75 C-list journals publish articles in the better-researched field of economics.

There are historical reasons behind China's comparatively low supply of

academic journals. Since 1988, government press-regulators have [permitted](#) colleges and research institutes to legally publish journals by issuing them with serial numbers. Each number allows the institution to publish one journal, and they are distributed more or less equitably, regardless of the quality of the institution's research. Even prestigious places of learning like Nanjing University only hold the rights to publish a maximum of two journals. This is far fewer than most of their Western counterparts, where publishers can theoretically apply for unlimited numbers of International Standard Serial Numbers. (Sixteen current journals are currently [produced](#) by the Harvard Law School; Oxford University Press [turns out](#) more than 400.)

*In other countries, scholars and institutions can easily apply to set up a new journal, but in China, journals are [more tightly] managed.*

*- Zhu Jian, journal editor*

Restrictions on journal numbers mean that Chinese institutions usually put out comprehensive publications instead of subject-specific ones, and hire editors with general, rather than specialist,

knowledge, said Zhu Jian, chief editor of the Journal of Nanjing University. "In other countries, scholars and institutions can easily apply to set up a new journal, but in China, journals are [more tightly] managed." Zhu said, adding that, over time, the serial-number system has suppressed the pursuit of rigorous scholarship and professionalism. "Not all institutions can support truly advanced academic study."

In addition, young scholars struggle for exposure in Chinese journals, because university staff mostly judge each publication's influence according to the impact-factor (IF) rankings, instead of by the more diversified measures employed by Western institutions, said Liu, a lecturer in law at a university in eastern China. The IF system, which was introduced to China in the late 1980s and refined in the late 1990s, quantifies the average number of citations to recent articles published in a certain journal,

in order to rank its relative importance in its field. "The rankings change every two years, so journals that want to stay high on the list tend to choose papers from accomplished scholars, and even flatly refuse papers from doctorate students," Liu explained.



XiXinXing/VCG

China's inadequate peer-review system further erodes academic professionalism, scholars told Sixth Tone. In the West, manuscripts are subjected to the scrutiny of an often-anonymous group of experts in the same field to ensure that the final paper meets established standards. But in China, the process is far from transparent. Zhou, the Chinese literature student, said that virtually none of the 50 or so papers he submitted for peer review were returned with suggested improvements, implying that reviewers had given each text a cursory read instead of fully engaging with

it.

Zhu, the Nanjing-based editor, said that peer reviews in China are often conducted by people unfamiliar with the writer's area of expertise, and that reviewers and journal editors sometimes hasten or ignore the peer review process to rush out articles thought to enhance the publication's IF score and overall reputation. "The peer-review culture is tightly connected to the futures of schools, institutes, departments, and scholars," he said. "It is almost impossible to uphold a fair system when it carries such huge benefits, power, and pressure."

Perhaps inevitably, China's large numbers of thesis-hawking doctoral students has created a lucrative market for academic fraud. In some cases, journals openly charge less-experienced contributors a fee in return for publishing their work. Last year, Wu Dongfeng, the former chief editor of *Seeker* — a C-list social science journal affiliated with the Hunan Academy of Social Sciences — was [imprisoned](#) for accepting a total of 8 million yuan (\$1.16 million) in bribes from academics in return for publishing their research.

*Journals are all about connections.*  
- Anonymous doctoral student

"Corruption at journals like *Seeker* is an open secret in the academic world," said Liu, adding that Chinese journal editors — some of whom are young master's or doctoral graduates themselves — conduct many transactions through middlemen. Other editors cultivate reciprocal connections with writers on the assumption that, in the future, they will also help the editor out when they or their students look for a place to publish their work.

"I've tried submitting papers through official channels, but never got a response," an anonymous Shanghai-based doctorate student of Chinese



literature told Sixth Tone, adding that he eventually published his thesis by passing the paper to his supervisor's friend, who worked as an editor at a C-list publication. "Journals are all about connections," he said. A recent graduate in law at a major Shanghai university told Sixth Tone that, while studying for his master's degree, some of his peers paid certain C-list journals around 80,000 yuan to publish their work. "Usually, the agents negotiate a price with journals, which varies based on their popularity," he said. "It can be anything from several hundred to tens of thousands of yuan."

And online, scholars are seemingly never more than a few clicks away from securing a chapter in a Chinese journal. When Sixth Tone searched the term "C-list" on Taobao, China's e-commerce behemoth, countless sellers appeared that specialized in academic-paper publishing. When Sixth Tone posed as a prospective customer, two vendors we spoke to offered to write a C-list paper for us and bring it to publication for 55,000 yuan. One promised to publish us in one of China's best-regarded international communication journals.

Fraudsters profit from Chinese academics in other ways, too. Some set up fake websites and email addresses, masquerade as legitimate C-list journals, and trick students into submitting their papers and personal information. Then, they charge unsuspecting scholars so-called review fees totaling several hundred yuan, or else convince them to part with their money in return for a publication deal that never materializes.

Several interviewees told Sixth Tone that fake journals are often among the first results to appear on Baidu, China's most popular search engine. Liu, the law lecturer, once accidentally sent a paper to one such outfit. "After that, I received phone calls from agents, who promised to publish me in C-list journals," he recalled, but added that he never paid them any money.



A student stands between book shelves in a university library in Shenyang, Liaoning province, July 5, 2018. VCG

Ruan Kai, former editor of the Shanghai-based C-list social-science journal *Exploration and Free Views*, said that more than 10 scholars during his three-year tenure called him to ask when their papers would be published, having paid several thousand yuan to fraudsters. It was left to Ruan to tell them they'd been tricked. "Fake [journal] websites usually copy content from real ones, so students who worry about getting published and can't tell the difference will fall for them," he said. Ruan emphasized that, to the best of his knowledge, *Exploration and Free Views* never accepted money in return for publishing. "C-list journals that value their reputations wouldn't do that," he concluded.

Overreliance on C-list journals and IF scores is partly a product of the Chinese university system, in which nonacademic staff play an outsized role in determining the nature of research, scholars say. "Administrative staff dominate China's education system. They're the ones deciding which projects and scholars get funding, and they're using indexes like IF to do it," said Zhu, the Nanjing-based editor. "That is why schools demand so many C-list publications from students and teaching staff."

*When you have to publish 10 C-list papers to become a professor, it makes you focus on quantity, not quality.*

*- Chen Zishan, journal editor*

But this mechanism compels scholars to desperately churn out papers at the expense of quality. "When you have to publish 10 C-list papers to become a professor, it makes you focus on quantity, not quality," said Chen Zishan, chief editor of Review and Research on Chinese Literature, a journal in East China Normal University. "This is clearly absurd."

For Zhou, the Chinese literature Ph.D., graduation is still up in the air. He has waited six months for his second C-list paper to be published, but the journal is tight-lipped about when it will actually happen. If Zhou ends up having to postpone graduation until next year, he'll have to pay extra tuition fees of 10,000 yuan.

A gentle personality, Zhou nonetheless became agitated when talking about getting his work published. "Some of my peers have quit school under all this pressure," he said, "but I must pull myself together and get on with it."

*Editor: Matthew Walsh.*

*(Header image: A student pores over documents in a university library in Chongqing, Oct. 11, 2018. Hong Ye/VCG)*

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