

System Part 2: Navigating China's Publishing Ambition — Strategic Options for International Publishers

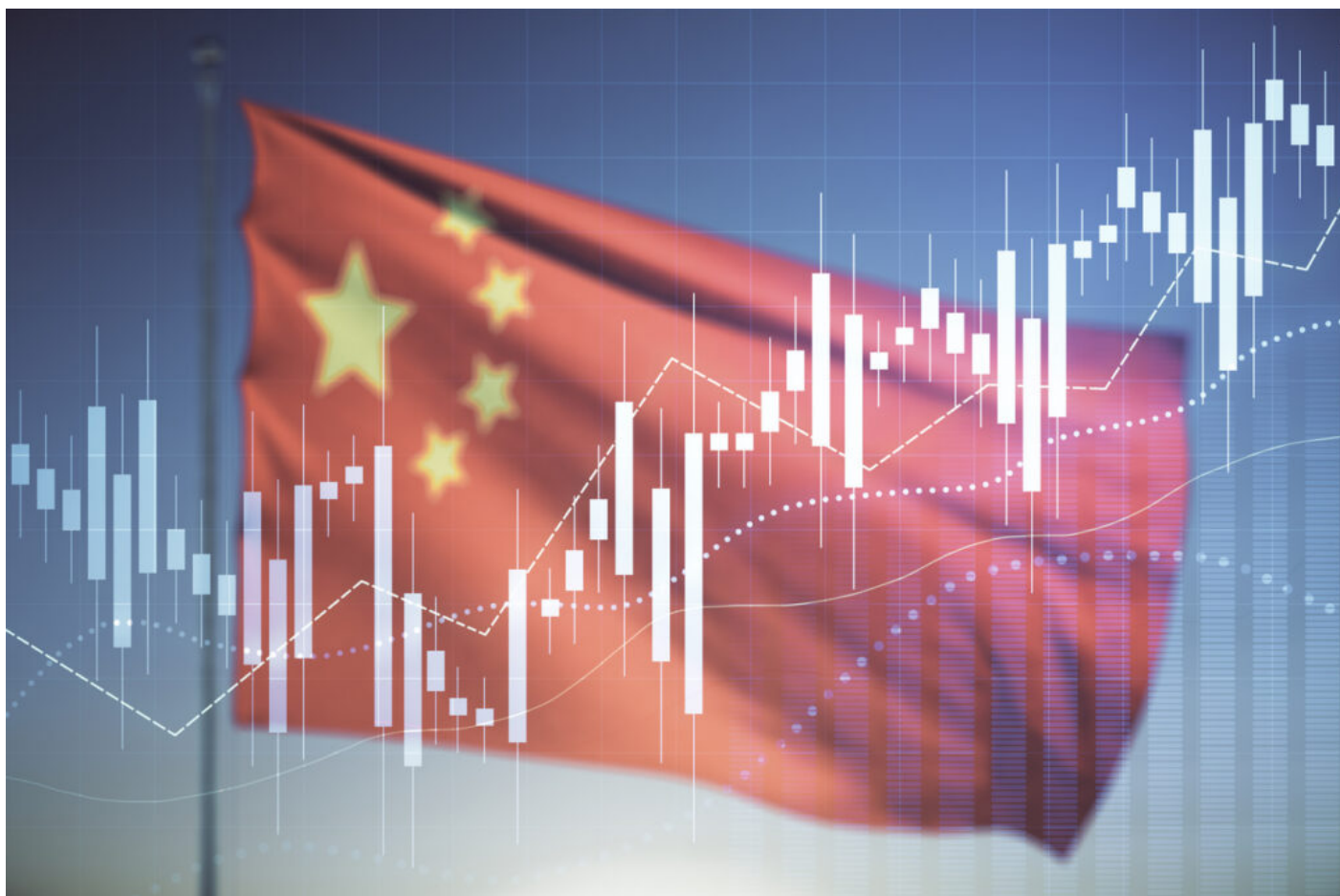
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Editor's Note: Today's post is by Scholarly Kitchen Chef Ashutosh Ghildiyal, Ning Zhang, Gareth Dyke, and Yanli Wang. Ning is the founder and CEO of TopEdit Author Services. Gareth is a Consultant specialising in scholarly markets and researcher networks in China and Central Asia, and is a co-founder of Sci-Train. Yanli is the Publishing Service Director at TopEdit. [Part 1 is available here](#).

In Part 1, [we examined the forces reshaping China's scholarly publishing landscape](#): the second phase of the [Journal Excellence Action Plan](#), expanding domestic publishing mandates, shifting APC policies, emerging evaluation frameworks, and the growing research funding base that underpins them. Viewed collectively, these developments point to something larger than journal development alone. China is building an increasingly integrated scholarly publishing ecosystem in which funding, publication venues, evaluation systems, editorial networks, and policy incentives reinforce one another.

China's publishing ambitions create genuine competitive pressures, but they also open opportunities for collaboration and highlight challenges that neither side can address alone. A thoughtful response requires distinguishing between developments that represent direct competition, those that signal broader structural shifts requiring adaptation, and those that call for collective action across the scholarly publishing community.



Competition Between Publishing Systems

If the central argument of Part 1 is correct, then the strategic question facing international publishers is no longer simply who has the best journals. The emerging competition is increasingly between publishing systems: interconnected combinations of funding mechanisms, publication venues, evaluation frameworks, editorial networks, and policy incentives.

Chinese researchers are increasingly making portfolio decisions, allocating their work across different publishing ecosystems based on a combination of career incentives, funder mandates, domestic rankings, international visibility, and long-term professional goals. Publishing choices are becoming less about loyalty to a single journal or publisher and more about navigating multiple systems of recognition and reward. Publishers that view these developments as temporary market distortions rather than structural shifts risk being caught off guard.

International publishers must work harder to remain attractive to Chinese authors, while Chinese journals must continue building credibility and trust among global researchers. Understanding how researchers balance domestic recognition, funding alignment, international visibility, and career mobility is becoming a central strategic challenge.

Strategic Responses for International Publishers

International publishers continue to possess significant strengths, including global reach, established brands, editorial expertise, and researcher trust. However, the case for publishing in international journals can no longer rest primarily on Impact Factor. As alternative evaluation frameworks gain prominence, the Impact Factor's role as the dominant signal of prestige may become increasingly contested. The more durable value proposition lies in global visibility, broad citation reach, international collaboration opportunities, and career mobility.

Institutional engagement is likely to become as important as journal-level competition. Society publishers and specialist publishers should consider building deeper relationships with Chinese universities, hospitals, and research institutes through editorial partnerships, training initiatives, research integrity programs, and community engagement. Relationships built around long-term participation in the research ecosystem are likely to prove more resilient than those based primarily on submission flows.

Author experience is another increasingly important differentiator. In a more competitive and fragmented publishing landscape, speed, transparency, predictability, and quality of service become strategic assets. Researchers are more likely to favor publishers that combine rigorous editorial standards with efficient review processes and clear communication throughout the publication journey.

Publishers must also respond to growing sensitivity around APC expenditure. As organizations such as CAS become more selective in funding publication charges, pricing structures will become a more important competitive factor. Institutional agreements, tiered pricing models, and targeted waiver programs should be viewed not simply as pricing mechanisms but as strategic tools for maintaining participation within key research communities.

Finally, expanding Chinese representation within editorial boards, reviewer pools, and advisory structures is more than a symbolic gesture. It strengthens credibility, deepens relationships with research communities, and better reflects the global distribution of research activity. Publishers whose governance and editorial structures evolve alongside the changing geography of research will be better positioned to remain relevant in an increasingly multipolar publishing environment.

The Reviewer Constraint: A Shared Problem

One of the less discussed but potentially significant constraints on the future of scholarly publishing is reviewer capacity. As research output continues to grow, the demand for qualified reviewers is rising faster than the supply of trained, willing, and engaged experts. Longer review times, reviewer fatigue, inconsistent review quality, and heightened integrity risks are increasingly affecting the entire publishing ecosystem.

Addressing this challenge requires investment in reviewer development as a form of scholarly infrastructure. Formal reviewer training programs, discipline-specific ethics education, and partnerships with universities to incorporate peer review training into doctoral and early-career researcher development could help expand the reviewer pool while improving review quality. Greater recognition of reviewing as a meaningful scholarly contribution, through certification programs, reviewer recognition platforms, or other incentive mechanisms, may also help narrow the growing gap between demand and participation.

More fundamentally, publishers may need to move beyond largely ad hoc approaches to reviewer recruitment and begin treating reviewer communities as assets that require long-term cultivation. Structured reviewer development programs, discipline-based reviewer networks, and shared standards for reviewer training represent investments that could strengthen the resilience of the broader scholarly communication system.

This is an area where the interests of international and Chinese publishers are largely aligned. Encouragingly, organizations such as [The Society of China University Journals](#) have already begun exploring approaches to reviewer development, offering a foundation for broader collaboration and knowledge sharing across the publishing community.

Research Integrity as Shared Infrastructure

The integrity dimension introduced in Part 1 warrants further consideration because [research integrity is increasingly becoming a foundational component of publishing infrastructure](#), rather than simply an editorial function. Managing integrity risks requires sustained investment in screening technologies, forensic workflows, editorial expertise, and governance frameworks. It also requires care to ensure that legitimate researchers are not unfairly stigmatized through association with the actions of a minority of bad actors. As publishing systems become more interconnected, broad assumptions and uneven scrutiny can create challenges that are themselves detrimental to trust.

As Chinese journals expand in scale and influence, they will encounter many of the same integrity challenges that international publishers have spent years addressing, including paper mills, peer review manipulation, image fraud, authorship disputes, and citation gaming. At the same time, newer journals and publishing platforms are likely to operate under heightened scrutiny as they seek to establish credibility within the global research community. The most constructive framing is therefore not one of Chinese integrity versus Western integrity, but of shared infrastructure supporting a shared challenge.

This creates opportunities for collaboration. The development of common integrity standards, shared approaches to reviewer and editor training, coordinated governance among indexers and publishers, and greater transparency around metrics and evaluation frameworks could strengthen trust across the broader scholarly ecosystem.

As researchers increasingly publish across multiple journals, platforms, and evaluation systems, integrity risks such as citation manipulation, excessive self-citation, peer review fraud, and coordinated network behavior become challenges that transcend institutional and national boundaries.

For this reason, integrity should increasingly be viewed as shared infrastructure. The more interconnected and multi-centered scholarly publishing becomes, the greater the need for transparent, consistently applied, and internationally credible standards that foster trust while avoiding geographic or institutional bias. In a world of multiple publishing ecosystems, trust may ultimately become one of the most important forms of infrastructure of all.

Compete, Collaborate, or Reposition

For international publishers assessing their position in a more multipolar publishing environment, three broad strategic paths are emerging. These are not mutually exclusive, and most organizations will likely pursue some combination of all three.

The first is competition. Established publishers retain important advantages in brand reputation, editorial expertise, global reach, and researcher trust. Defending and strengthening these assets remains essential. In an environment where evaluation systems may become more plural and researcher loyalties more distributed, trust, quality, and credibility become increasingly important sources of differentiation.

The second is collaboration. Co-publishing arrangements, society partnerships, editorial service models, training initiatives, and platform integrations can provide valuable pathways for engagement with China's rapidly evolving research ecosystem. For society and specialist publishers in particular, collaboration may offer opportunities to build relationships and community presence that would be difficult to achieve independently. Such partnerships should not be viewed as a retreat from competition, but as a recognition that scholarly publishing is becoming increasingly interconnected and multipolar.

The third is repositioning. If a growing share of research output is directed toward domestic publishing ecosystems, competitive advantage may increasingly reside beyond the journal itself. Research workflow solutions, research integrity services, peer review infrastructure, editorial technologies, and author-facing support services all represent areas where publishers can continue to create value regardless of where research is ultimately published.

A More Multi-Centered Publishing Landscape

China's publishing ambitions should not be understood solely as a challenge to established publishers. They also reflect a broader effort to build research infrastructure that serves Chinese science, is governed by Chinese institutions, and is evaluated according to frameworks that Chinese researchers and funders regard as credible.

The evidence reviewed across both parts of this series suggests that China's journal ecosystem is entering a new phase of development. The launch of 120 new journals under Phase II of the Excellence Action Plan, sustained investment in publishing platforms and journal clusters, evolving APC policies, emerging evaluation frameworks, and a rapidly expanding research funding base all point to the same conclusion: China is no longer simply participating in the global scholarly publishing system; it is actively building one of its own.

For international publishers, the implications extend far beyond journal competition. What is emerging is not merely a contest between publishers or titles, but increasingly a competition between publishing systems, each comprising funding mechanisms, publication venues, evaluation frameworks, editorial networks, and policy incentives that reinforce one another. The central question is no longer whether Chinese journals will continue to rise, but how a more multi-centered scholarly publishing landscape will evolve and how different systems will interact, compete, and collaborate.

This shift does not necessarily imply fragmentation or declining standards. A more plural publishing environment could ultimately contribute to a more genuinely global scholarly communication system, one that better reflects the increasingly distributed nature of research production, funding, and expertise. Whether that potential is realized will depend on the choices made by publishers, funders, institutions, and researchers across all regions.

Long-term success is likely to depend less on scale alone and more on the ability to build trust, maintain credibility, and create value across multiple research communities. Editorial stewardship, research integrity, community engagement, and meaningful institutional relationships will become increasingly important sources of differentiation. The organizations best positioned for the future may not be those that dominate a single ecosystem, but those capable of operating credibly across several. In an increasingly multi-centered publishing landscape, the ability to bridge systems may prove as important as the ability to lead one.



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