

Review

Going Open Access: The Attitudes and Actions of Scientific Journal Editors in China

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the attitudes and actions of scientific journal editors in China towards open access. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 Chinese editors from various scientific journals during September and October of 2022. The results indicate that the editors generally possess knowledge of open access and have implemented an appropriate open access model for their respective journals. However, the Chinese-language journal editors expressed a lack of motivation to adopt open access, unless there is a reform in the mechanism of academic publishing or a policy is imposed. On the other hand, the English-language journal editors acknowledged that they have no other choice but to adopt open access. This study helps us learn about Chinese editors' understanding and attitudes towards open access, the current status of open access in China's scientific journals, and the mechanisms of academic publishing in China.

Keywords

Open access; Scientific journals; Editors; China.

INTRODUCTION

With the widespread adoption of the open science concept and the implementation of relevant policies, open access (OA) publishing has experienced rapid growth. Out of the 73 multidisciplinary science journals listed in SCI (Science Citation Index) 2021, 37 (50.7%) are now published through OA, contributing to a total of 64,111 papers, which represents 85.2% of the overall publications by these 73 journals (75,238 papers). The scale of OA publishing by international publishers has notably expanded in recent years. In comparison to 2020, the total number of SCI-indexed journals published by Elsevier and Springer Nature (Both held a dominant position in terms of the number of OAJs including gold OA/diamond OA, hybrid OA, bronze OA, and other variants) offering OA increased by 62% and 12%, respectively, in 2021. Furthermore, the total number of SCI-indexed papers released by prominent OA publishers such as MDPI and Frontiers Media saw respective increases of 42% and 72%. In 2021, Nature Publishing Group achieved a substantial shift in its journal publishing model, with 85% of its SCI-indexed papers contributing

to the total number of papers it publishes, marking a significant transformation in its approach to open access.

In April 2022, the International Association of Scientific, Technical, and Medical Publishers (STM) unveiled "International Scientific and Technical Publishing Trends 2026" (STM Trends 2026), marking the world's most comprehensive publication report. The central theme of STM Trends 2026 revolves around "The Beauty of Open at Scale". This forecast is grounded in the substantial growth of open access content in scholarly publishing throughout the 21st century, coupled with the escalating policy mandates for scholarly publishing in numerous countries and regions [1]. An illustrative example is "Plan S", initiated in September 2018 with backing from the European Commission. This collaborative effort by major research funding agencies from 11 European countries mandates that all research projects supported by grants from these nations and the European Research Council (ERC) publish their outcomes exclusively in fully open access journals or on open access platforms. The ultimate goal is to shift away from the subscription model, where readers bear the cost, and instead, authors or third-party funding

organizations cover the expenses associated with paper processing. Besides, in August 2022, The White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) further advanced the cause by issuing updated guidance on open access policy. This directive stipulates that all research papers funded by federal funds must be immediately accessible to the public at no charge by 2026 [2]. Notably, the revised policy eliminates the existing 12-month waiting period for access to research results, encompassing articles and data. Anticipated to exert a considerable influence on global open access, this policy is poised to enhance the accessibility and transparency of scientific research for the public. It is foreseeable that these policies will significantly expedite the progress of global open access publishing.

The origin of the OA movement in China can be traced back to the establishment of China Science and Technology Papers Online (CSTP), a scholarly communication platform founded in 2003. Over the past two decades, China has actively embraced OA policies and practices, becoming a signatory and implementer of significant international OA initiatives. A crucial milestone occurred in December 2021 when the Law of the People's Republic of China on Scientific and Technological Progress was revised. This revision mandated the promotion of open science, officially recognizing open access as a national direction for science and technology development.

The number of OAs in China continues to rise, and by 2022, China had a total of 1088 OAs, or 21.5% of the total. However, the operational dynamics of Chinese scientific journals differ significantly due to distinctive national characteristics. In China, academic publishing is a government-regulated enterprise rather than a fully market-driven one. The government possesses the authority to oversee and approve the establishment of scientific journals. In contrast, many other countries generally adopt a registration system, and their scholarly publishing operations tend to be market-oriented [3]. Given that China is a major contributor to scientific journals and a significant participant in global OA, studying the development of OA in China's scientific journals holds great significance. Editors are the people who directly manage the journals and they play a crucial role in the OA practices of the journals because their attitudes, actions, and opinions have a great impact on whether the journals are OA or not [4]. Therefore, it is important to understand how editors become aware of OA, their willingness to promote OA publishing, and whether they have already taken actions to facilitate such publishing. It is also essential to explore the motivations and obstacles that editors currently face in promoting OA. To address these issues, this study focuses on Chinese editors as research subjects and aims to investigate their perceptions and opinions regarding OA through empirical research and further analysis.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Status of Open Access Journals

In recent years, a few studies have conducted in-depth analyses of open access journals (OAs) in different countries. Between 1993 and 2009, the number of OAs experienced rapid and continuous growth, outpacing the expansion of traditional subscription-based journal publications. This trend signifies the gradual emergence of the open access model in scholarly communication [5]. Predominantly originating from Europe, Asia [6], and North America, the United States, Brazil, and the United Kingdom stand out as the main publishing countries for OAs [7]. Furthermore, an increasing

number of newly established peer-reviewed journals are embracing the open access model, and simultaneously, more OAs are implementing article processing charges (APCs) [8,9]. Between 2002 and 2013, within the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh led in the publication of OAs, although the collective contribution of SAARC countries to global OAs output remained relatively modest [10]. Examining eight developing countries (Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Turkey) from 2000 to 2014, Egypt emerged with the highest number of OAs, while Bangladesh exhibited the lowest. Egypt, Iran, and Turkey collectively accounted for three quarters of all OAs published by these countries [11]. From 2002 to 2018, the United Kingdom experienced the most significant growth in the number of OAs, followed by Brazil and Spain. In the realm of open access publishing, commercial publishers, led by Elsevier, held a dominant position in terms of the number of OAs [12]. Research focusing on Pakistan has revealed that the majority (90%) of academic journals in the country operate under the open access paradigm. Of these journals, more than two thirds adopt the diamond OA model, followed by gold OA (26%) and Crowdfunding OA (3%) [13].

In recent decades, the proliferation of OAs in China has been noteworthy. In 2008, among the 1608 journals cataloged by the Chinese Science & Technology Journal Citation Reports (CJCR-2005), 91 journals offered full OA, and 139 offered delayed OA. As of 2022, the open publishing landscape of China's scientific and technical journals has evolved with a diverse array of OA modes, including gold OA/diamond OA, hybrid OA, bronze OA, and other variants. Out of the 5071 Chinese scientific journals, 1088 are OAs. Among them, 875 journals adopt the bronze OA publishing mode, constituting the highest proportion (80.42%), followed by gold OA/diamond OA journals (131 journals, 12.04%). There are also 82 journals (7.54%) employing a hybrid OA publishing model, primarily associated with large international publishers. As of August 2022, 1262 journals are sourced from the Chinese Science Citation Database (CSCD), and among them, 1088 CSCD-sourced journals employ various OA publishing modes, accounting for 86.21%. Notably, English-language journals exhibit a higher prevalence of OA publishing modes, with 234 English OA journals constituting 95.51% of CSCD-sourced English journals (245 journals), and 854 Chinese OA journals accounting for 83.97% of CSCD-sourced Chinese journals (1017 journals) [14].

However, the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) lists only 278 journals from China (excluding those published in Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan), which is 1.46% of the total number of journals. Most of these journals are published in English (62.23%), while 26.26% are published in Chinese, and the remaining 11.51% are published in dual languages [15].

Additionally, the level of OAs varies greatly across different subjects in China, with highly cited articles having a higher OA level than low- and non-cited articles. Furthermore, the OA status of these journals is not stable, with some OAs later becoming non-OA. Most of China's OAs are published independently and are not part of a larger aggregation [16,17]. Although the gap between China and the US in terms of total papers and OA papers has been narrowing, the US still has a greater influence on the academic and societal aspects of OA publishing, and the coverage rates for Chinese OA papers are

lower than those for American OA papers in most indexes [18–20].

2.2. Researchers' Awareness towards OA

Research indicates a gradual increase in researchers' awareness of open access [21]. Numerous studies consistently demonstrate a positive attitude among researchers toward open access [22–24], with a consensus on its two primary advantages: widespread availability and enhanced visibility [25]. The significance of open access is particularly pronounced for readers in developing countries [26–28]. The broader readership of open access articles compared to subscription journals not only amplifies citation rates and author visibility but also fosters opportunities for international collaboration [29]. Moreover, researchers perceive open access as a facilitator of the swift publication of research results, leading to increased research productivity [30]. They also acknowledge the role of open access in benefiting the development of their respective subject areas [22,31].

Nevertheless, certain researchers have expressed reservations regarding open access. On the one hand, studies have indicated that open access journals (OAJs) are frequently perceived as having a lower quality compared to well-established and prestigious subscription journals [32,33]. The overwhelming consensus among researchers is that the quality and prestige of a journal are pivotal factors when selecting a venue for publishing their articles [23,34]. On the other hand, concerns have been raised about the potentially prohibitive cost associated with open access. Some researchers have noted that the financial burden of open access might be too high, rendering it unaffordable for them [35,36].

In recent years, some studies have specifically investigated Chinese researchers' perceptions of OA, which show Chinese researchers' awareness of OA has changed considerably. In 2016, Xu Jie et al. [37] conducted a survey of 686 Chinese researchers to assess their perceptions of OAJs. The study revealed that while some Chinese researchers were skeptical and uncertain about OAJs, younger researchers and those in the field of biology and life sciences were more inclined towards OA publishing. Common misconceptions among Chinese scholars included confusing OA with the “who-pays-will-get-published” model and the assumption that all OAJs were not adequately peer-reviewed and published by reputable publishers. In a follow-up study conducted four years later, Xu Jie's team [38] surveyed 381 Chinese researchers and found a significant change in their attitudes towards OAJs. The majority held a positive view of OA publishing and demonstrated a greater understanding of it. However, when selecting OAJs for publication, researchers showed a strong preference for those indexed in reputable databases such as Web of Science. The usage of OAJs varied across disciplines, with researchers in HSS fields using them less frequently, but still maintaining a favorable view. Younger researchers tended to rely on prestigious institutions and authors when selecting OAJs. In 2022, a questionnaire survey gauging the awareness of open access among Chinese researchers revealed that 81.56% of the 1768 respondents endorsed open access publishing in scientific and technical journals. Among these, 16.23% demonstrated extensive knowledge of open access, and 42.42% had a comprehensive understanding of the concept. Notably, the respondents cited expanding the scope of dissemination and expediting the publication and dissemination of research results as the primary motivations for submitting articles to

open access journals. Interestingly, there was minimal disparity in the willingness of the respondents to contribute to traditional subscription journals and hybrid open access journals, accounting for 63.91% and 65.84%, respectively. In contrast, 35.63% expressed a willingness to contribute to gold open access journals, whereas only 5.32% were open to contributing to delayed open access journals. Regarding the acceptable range of article processing charges (APCs) among Chinese researchers, the majority (66.35%) preferred a range below 5000 RMB (about \$700), while 28.88% were comfortable with the range of 5000–10,000 RMB (\$700–\$1400). Fewer than 5% expressed a willingness to accept APCs exceeding 10,000 RMB (about \$1400) [39].

2.3. Editors' Awareness towards OA

Between 2014 and 2015, Castella et al. [40] conducted a questionnaire survey targeting the editors of library and information science journals. The findings unveiled a balanced perspective, with 40% of respondents expressing favor for OA, while an equal 40% opposed it. Interestingly, a prevalent belief among the respondents was that OA would inevitably evolve into the primary model for scholarly journals in the near future. Another survey, conducted by Claudio-González and Villarroja [41] in 2015, among Spanish scientific journal editors, depicted a positive inclination towards OA. Approximately 36.4% of the editors supported OA, citing reasons such as enhanced visibility and internationalization. In contrast, only 4.7% were opposed, primarily due to concerns related to weak financing and perceived non-viability. Building on these surveys, a subsequent questionnaire survey by Tony Ross-Hellauer et al. [24] in 2016 added depth to the understanding of editorial perspectives on OA. The results revealed that a majority of editors, particularly those from younger generations, exhibited strong support for OA in publishing.

Editors with a positive attitude consider OA as a means to provide readers worldwide with free access to published papers without needing to subscribe to the journal [42]. OA fulfills the need for immediate access to information and provides a platform for professionals to share high-quality scientific findings [43,44]. Individual readers can use OA materials to facilitate research endeavors and collaboration, which should be encouraged to promote the development of science [45]. Additionally, OAJs enable the quicker and wider distribution of information, resulting in broader international communication and circulation, and reducing the risk of research overlap [43,46].

Some editors lack enthusiasm for OA publishing and even oppose it due to a series of issues. One major concern is the requirement for authors to pay article processing charges (APCs) to the publisher for publishing their work [47]. These editors hold the view that APCs would create a financial barrier to publication for researchers who cannot afford these fees, leading to the exclusion of authors from resource-limited countries from the scientific discourse [4]. Additionally, some editors fear that the high APCs associated with OAJs would cause a substantial decrease in submissions [48]. Moreover, the rise of “predatory OAJs” has been a pernicious and perhaps unanticipated consequence of OA publishing [49]. Some editors even described it as “the worst thing in publishing, ever”. [50] Furthermore, according to a study conducted by Segado-Boj et al. [4], which involved 15 interviews with editors of Spanish journals, the OA model has generated concerns about the profitability of journals.

Furthermore, some editors are neutral about OA because they turned to OA because they were required to by their organizers. For example, in 2021, Bautista-Puig et al. [51] conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 Spanish editors, which showed that the decision to transition to OA was often driven by the Spanish National Research Council, a state agency for scientific research, deciding to make the transition, and developed a set of requirements, which all the journals had to comply with.

Journals that transition to OA tend to collaborate with large publishers for the necessary resources and infrastructure. For example, the partnership between the ASBMB (American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology) publications and Elsevier has opened up many opportunities such as facilitated content discovery for readers, improved peer review mechanisms, and provided new technology for manuscript handling and production [52]. Similarly, German Law Journal has introduced a new functionality since publishing with Cambridge, including a professionalized publishing process, permanent identifiers (DOIs) to all articles, and long-term archiving arrangements, and so on [53].

To address the financial burden of APCs on authors, some editors have collaborated with publishers to offer automatic waivers and discounts for authors from low- and middle- income countries [54]. Other editors have sought to reduce APCs by implementing cost-saving measures, such as launching sister journals or seeking institutional funding [55]. Meanwhile, some editors believe that OAJs should be completely free to both readers and authors and have proven that a 100% free model is feasible and sustainable in the long run [56].

Some editors face obstacles during the transition to OA, including the unfamiliarity and misunderstanding of OA, the lack of financial support, the constraints of the current scientific assessment system, confusion about copyright agreements, the negative impact of predatory journals, etc. [57,58]. Furthermore, while it may be easy to start a journal as an OAJ, it requires ongoing investment in people, money, documentation, and platform maintenance to operate sustainably [59,60].

However, few studies have been performed, especially for Chinese editors, except in 2007, when Shao and Scherlen [61] interviewed six Chinese editors. The study found that the editors were positive about OA and saw some barriers to journals adopting OA, including rigid management, a single subscription and distribution process, and an environment that did not encourage more quality improvement in China. However, this study is outdated, and the situation may have changed significantly since then. To explore the latest situation, this research aims to conduct a study on Chinese editors' attitudes, actions, and opinions regarding OA, using a semi-structured interview method.

3. Method

3.1. Research Purpose and Questions

This study aims to explore the attitudes and understanding of Chinese editors towards OA, and the drivers and obstacles encountered in the development of OA to China's scientific journals as well as the current OA status of China's scientific journals from editor's perspective. Specifically, the study focuses on three main aspects:

Q1: What are the attitudes and understanding of Chinese editors towards OA? Q2: What do editors identify as the driving force and

obstacles of OA publishing? Q3: What practices have Chinese editors taken to make their journals OA?

3.2. Research Method and Data Collection

The findings of this study were obtained through a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with editors of China's scientific journals between September and October 2022. Semi-structured interviews are a commonly used qualitative research method that offers flexibility and versatility, allowing interviewers to follow up on participants' responses and providing space for participants to express themselves freely [62]. By utilizing this method, our study aimed to gain insight into editors' perspectives and practices on OA. In this study, we interviewed 17 participants both online and offline in September– October 2022, with each respondent spending approximately one hour on the interview. We collated all information from the interviews and returned it to the respondents for confirmation and agreement. And then used Nvivo for categorization and coding, and we presented representative views word-for-word.

The 17 participants were editors aged between 30 and 40 years old, comprising 82.4% of the total. The proportion of female (76.5%) and male (23.5%) participants roughly aligns with the results of a previous small-scale mapping survey conducted by China Publishing Media Business Daily.

All participants had obtained master's degrees or higher, with 52.9% and 47.1% holding master's and doctoral degrees, respectively. All participants were working as editors of scientific journals and most of them (82.4%) had more than 5 years of experience. Some of (45.5%) them (e.g., Intermediate Editor, Executive Associate Editor, Editorial Reviewer) are involved in top management decisions of the journal. Given the participants' extensive experience in the publishing and operation of scientific journals, their attitudes, practices, and perceptions towards OA are valuable for further study and learning. The participants engaged in a discussion regarding the publication and operation of 20 scientific journals, comprising 9 Chinese-language and 11 English-language journals. This provided an opportunity for a comparative analysis of the similarities and differences between Chinese-language and English-language journals. The overall profile of the participants and the surveyed journals is shown in Table 1.

4. Findings and Discussions

In light of the international trend towards OA, Chinese editors have made significant efforts to adapt. They have familiarized themselves with the knowledge of OA, taken steps to promote OA to journals, and developed informed perspectives on the transition of China's scientific journals to OA.

4.1. Understanding and Attitudes

The results of the interviews indicate that all 17 interviewees have an awareness of OA, but their understanding and attitudes of OA vary.

4.1.1. OA Is a Publishing Model Where Readers Are Free and Authors Pay

Over half (55.6%) of the interviewed editors are familiar with OA through their work, while others learned about it under the promotion of institutional and academic societies. In discussing their understanding of OA, the editors frequently used the term "free access" (82.35%), with some editors equating OA with free access. A total of 35.29% of the interviewed editors recognized that OA is

a publishing mode that requires authors to pay, and 29.41% of the interviewed editors understood that it facilitates the dissemination and use of journals. Some editors (17.65%) acknowledged that journals transitioning to OA must comply with relevant protocols and standards, and different OA models require different protocols. One editor also emphasized the importance of respecting authors' rights. "Open access is free access", (13CNF) the editor of a hybrid OAJ explained. "After the author pays, all readers can have free access". (07ENGF)

"OA resources can be accessed by visitors for free, but how users use OA resources also needs to follow certain standards". (04ENGF)

The interviewed editors have shown interest in various aspects of OA, with 64.71% concerned about the development of OA movement both domestically and abroad, including the practices of international publishers, the construction of OA platforms, and the development trend of OAJs. A total of 64.71% are curious about the workflows and standards for each OA model, including copyright agreements, peer review rules, and APCs. Additionally, 47.06% are interested in the advantages and disadvantages of OA, such as its ability to enhance the influence and accelerate the dissemination of journals, as well as its potential impact on the reputation. About 23.53% pay attention to OA policies established by national or regional government and research funding agencies. Finally, 17.65% are interested in the attitudes and actions of the academic community (including research funding agencies, research institutions, universities, researchers, etc.) toward OA, as shown in Table 2.

"I will be interested in the percentage of OA articles in my field, the percentage of OA journals, and trends in their percentages. While I won't focus exclusively on purely OA information, I will also keep an eye on what the attitudes of people within the discipline towards OA are". (06ENGF)

"I think APC has developed more and more outrageous, and now it is hard to convince researchers to accept it, so I will be concerned about APC related information". (04ENGF)

4.1.2. OA Can Increase the Influence of Journals and Attract Manuscripts

The interviewed editors have recognized numerous advantages (as shown in Table 3) and generally agree (82.35%) that it can facilitate scholarly communication and collaboration, as well as accelerate global scientific dissemination. One editor noted that OA has been particularly helpful for researchers during the COVID-19 pandemic, enabling academic communication to continue despite physical distancing measures.

A total of 58.82% of the interviewees expressed their belief that OA has the potential to enhance the dissemination and influence of journals by removing the paywall for readers and making articles more widely accessible, especially for those who face financial constraints. Additionally, OA encourages readers to build on the original research in greater depth, thereby increasing the citation rate and visibility of the journals.

"If journals only rely on subscription models, countries or regions with limited research capacity and funding, particularly those in the third world, may struggle to access literature resources. However, with the OA model, economically stronger countries such as Europe

and the United States can bear the OA costs, and this would allow countries, regions, and institutions with weaker scientific research capabilities to gain access to these resources".

According to 35.29% of the editors surveyed, the OA model has the advantage of attracting more submissions. Firstly, OAJs have faster review and publication cycles compared to subscription journals, which is an attractive feature for authors. Additionally, OA articles can be disseminated more widely and accessed by more readers, leading to increased citations, downloads, and academic and social influence for the authors. Furthermore, diamond OAJs not only do not charge authors but also provide a range of value-added services, making them highly desirable for authors to submit their manuscripts.

In addition, 17.65% of the interviewed editors believe that adapting the OA model can increase the international exposure of journals, which can attract more international readers, thereby contributing to the international development of China's journals.

4.1.3. OA Can Lead to Lower Reputation and Quality of the Journal

Eleven of the editors interviewed also identified some of the disadvantages of OA publishing, as shown in Table 4. A total of 29.41% of the interviewed editors agreed that transitioning to OA can harm the reputation of journals. This is due to different attitudes toward OA among stakeholders, as some experts or institutions may have misconceptions about OA and believe that the quality of OAJs is inferior, thereby prohibiting their staff from submitting to OAJs. In this regard, the editors generally believe that the emergence of predatory journals has contributed to this issue, as these journals affect the reputation of OAJs and distort researchers' perception of OAJs.

"Domestic scholars sometimes hold a stereotypical view of OAJs, equating them with predatory journals that exist solely to receive APCs. As a result, some scholars only submit their work to subscription journals, believing that those are the only reputable journals. This phenomenon may be attributed to the negative impact that predatory journals had on the reputation of OAJs". (05ENGF)

"In the biomedical field, many authors have negative opinions about OAJs. One possible reason is the presence of numerous predatory journals in this field". (08CNF)

A total of 29.41% of the interviewed editors reported a phenomenon where the quality of journals has declined after switching to OA. This is primarily due to organizers prioritizing economic benefits and expanding the volume of issues without proper quality oversight in order to collect more APCs. Moreover, the absence of regulated integrity, intellectual property rights, and other OA policies may lead to academic misconduct.

Furthermore, 17.65% of the interviewed editors noted that researchers who lack funds may find it difficult to afford high APCs, which may cause them to prefer submitting their work to journals that do not charge APCs. Consequently, OAJs may lose submissions from this group of authors.

"For instance, in India, schools typically do not provide funding for APCs, and some young scholars may not have sufficient funds to submit their articles to OAJs". (05ENGF)

Moreover, 11.76% of the interviewed editors are also concerned

about the fact that most OAJs collaborate with international publishers, resulting in a significant amount of money flowing out of the country each year. They believe that this situation exists because China has not yet developed enough first-class journals.

4.2. Driving Force and Obstacles

Based on their professional experience, editors have gained valuable insights into the factors that drive or hinder journals' transition to OA publishing. The following are some of their top concerns, as shown in Tables 5 and 6.

4.2.1. Policies and Funding Help Drive Journals to OA

Almost all (82.35%) the interviewees emphasized the importance of national-level policies to promote OA for scientific journals in China. They believed that such policies would encourage editors and the academic community to take actions and accelerate the transition of journals to OA. The editors made specific policy recommendations, including providing necessary support for staffing, funding, and digital infrastructure, linking the assessment of journals, editors, and academic communities to OA actions, regulating APCs, and more. The implementation of these policies would help to establish a supportive environment for OA publishing in China and facilitate the growth of OA journals.

More than half (52.94%) of the interviewed editors consider financial support crucial to promote OA for scientific journals. Since journals that convert to OA require more funds for digital infrastructure, daily operation, and human resources, adequate financial support is necessary. Additionally, the issue of researchers being unable to afford the APCs must be addressed by providing them with financial support to cover the cost.

A total of 35.29% of the interviewed editors believe that raising awareness of OA among the academic community can encourage more journals to adopt OA policies. Given that journals depend on the academic community for high-quality manuscripts, increasing their familiarity with and recognition of OA may incentivize them to submit their work to OAJs. This could establish a sustainable and reliable source of manuscripts for journals.

In addition, 29.41% of the interviewed editors stated that China requires a more influential OA platform of its own. Although China already has an OA platform called COAJ, it lags significantly behind DOAJ in terms of functionality and influence. Therefore, China needs to accelerate the development of its OA infrastructure and establish an internationally competitive OA platform to promote the growth of OA in China.

4.2.2. Scientific Publishing Mechanism and Lack of Motivation and Funding Hinder Journals to OA

The majority (76.47%) of the interviewed editors believe that the mechanism of scientific publishing poses a significant obstacle to the implementation of OA in scientific publishing. In China, most scientific journals are independently owned by universities, societies, and research institutions, which are characterized by small-scale enterprises, loose industrial structure, and weak core competitiveness, commonly referred to as "small, loose, and weak". The lack of intensive management results in a costly and challenging transition to OA, making it difficult for editorial staff to push individual journals towards OA. This mechanism has led to the weak influence of in-

dividual journals and low readership on their official websites. As a result, many journals have signed "exclusive agreements" with China national knowledge infrastructure (CNKI) to place their resources on the integrated platform for better development.

A total of 70.59% of the interviewed editors expressed that there is a lack of incentives to adopt OA. This is mainly because most journals in China have partnered with CNKI, where the majority of readers access articles. The functions and value-added services provided by CNKI meet the needs of these journals. During interviews, questions like "why change?" "What's the motivation?" and "Is there an urgent need to switch to OA?" are frequently raised. Some editors even argue that embracing OA is unnecessary, as it may not bring any positive changes and could create unnecessary difficulties. This lack of perceived benefits has become a significant obstacle for China's journals when considering adopting OA.

According to several (64.71%) of the interviewed editors, it is challenging to promote OA to journals without financial support. Some organizers of journals have limited funds and find it difficult to cover costs on their own. One editor expressed concern that "if journals transition to OA, organizers and supervisors may no longer provide funding, and the journals may not survive on APCs. Additionally, some journals are sponsored by universities or institutions, which may have financial policies that control the pricing of APCs. Furthermore, it is unclear whether the collection of APCs may lead to other issues". (08CNF)

Nearly half (47.06%) of the interviewed editors identified the lack of awareness of OA among Chinese researchers as a hindrance to the accessibility of scientific journals. Currently, Chinese authors have limited awareness of OA and are unfamiliar with its definition and underlying philosophy. Furthermore, they tend to view OAJs unfavorably and perceive them as having a poor quality. Consequently, they see no benefits in submitting their work to OAJs. Without improving authors' recognition and awareness of OA, the transition to OA for scientific journals may not yield any significant outcomes.

4.3. Different Editors Have Different Practices

During our interviews, we discovered significant differences in the OA practices of Chinese-language and English-language journals.

4.3.1. Chinese-Language Journal Editors: Bronze OA Model Is the Preferred Choice

Three editors identified their journals as bronze OAJs, and one editor characterized their journal as a gold OAJ. The remaining four editors classified their journals as "non-standard OAJs," providing free access to resources on the official website but not strictly adhering to standard OA processes and criteria. In reality, these "non-standard OAJs" align with the bronze OA model, but due to a lack of comprehensive knowledge about the OA model, these editors were unable to accurately define their classification. In summary, among the surveyed Chinese journals, there are seven bronze OAJs, one gold OAJ, and one non-OAJ, as illustrated in Figure 1.

There are three main reasons why this non-OA journal has not taken any action related to OA. Firstly, the editors lack knowledge about OA and are not inclined to make any changes. Secondly, the journal managers (the ones who give instructions to editors) have a conservative attitude towards OA and are not open to the idea. Lastly, the journal is currently stable and implementing OA practices would

result in unnecessary workload and potential risks. The journal has no plans to transition to OA in the next five years, as they believe that whether Chinese-language journals are OA or not has little impact on the development of the journal. Furthermore, the “exclusive agreement” with CNKI has already determined the future direction of the journal’s development. This agreement requires journals to license their copyright to CNKI for exclusive use, prohibiting other vendors from producing, publishing, selling, or disseminating these journals in any digital form.

Among these eight open access journals (OAJs), one journal has embraced the gold OA model and has applied to join the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), aligning with their standards for regulating OA publishing activities. The remaining seven operate in the bronze mode. According to the editors of these seven bronze OA journals, varied motivations underlie their choice of OA practices. A portion of these editors (42.9%) considers OA as a fundamental function of the official website, serving as a means to attract both authors and readers to visit the platform. Another segment (14.3%) believes in prioritizing readers by offering free access to academic information services and knowledge-sharing platforms. Consequently, they allow readers to access articles freely on the journal’s official website. Some editors (14.3%) decide to provide OA resources on their websites based on authors’ suggestions who were unable to download their articles for free previously. In addition, a group of editors (14.3%) perceives little or no loss of profits for most Chinese-language journals by opening up resources on the official website, as their primary revenue sources come from paper subscriptions and page charges. One editor even emphasized that “profits from scientific journals cannot be used to encourage editors or improve publishing activities, so editors simply open journal resources for free” (14CNM). There is also a unique motivation: resistance against CNKI’s “exclusive agreement”. Some editors (28.6%) have opposed this agreement, asserting that it contradicts their original goals. Consequently, these journals have turned to OA as a strategy to explore more development opportunities.

Two editors expressed concerns that the transition to OA has not had many positive impacts on their journals, and in fact, it has caused some readers to misunderstand the journals as being of poor quality. On the other hand, one editor believes that the transition to OA has brought many positive effects, such as expanding the dissemination of the journal, enhancing its influence, and effectively spreading the author’s ideas and outputs: “For example, since the launch of the OA website in April 2021, the journal has received 11,255 downloads from 137 countries and 1124 institutions. In addition, the transition has attracted more quality articles, opened up communication with domestic and international colleagues at the level of OA construction”. (13CNF)

4.3.2. English-Language Journal Editors: Gold OA Model Is the Preferred Choice

All 11 of the English-language journals are OAJs. Among them, one journal has adopted the hybrid OA model, and three journals have adopted the diamond OA model, and the remaining seven journals have adopted the gold OA model. As shown in Figure 2.

The editor of the hybrid OAJ explained that their decision to adopt the hybrid OA model was primarily driven by authors’ increasing demand for OA publication options. Several countries have insti-

tuted OA policies mandating that authors’ research be published in OA models, and some authors themselves have requested to publish their results in OA formats. Consequently, the journal introduced the “OA publishing option” to authors in late 2010, and now 30% of the papers are published as OA each year. When asked about the possibility of transitioning entirely to OA, the editor indicated that this would hinge on the future OA policies of the countries where the core authors are based. While a full transition to OA may not necessarily result in more benefits, it could lead to a loss of manuscript sources and a decline in reputation.

All three diamond OAJs are newly established journals. According to the editors, they opted for the OA model due to requests from their co-publishers. In order to quickly expand their influence at home and abroad, and to attract more authors to submit manuscripts, the journals decided to waive APCs for authors and cover all the expenses of publication and operation themselves, choosing the diamond OA model. However, the editors also stated that once the journals have developed steadily and achieved a certain level of influence, they may transition to the gold OA model.

According to the editors of gold OAJs, six out of the seven journals adopted the OA publishing model due to mandatory requirements from partner publishers. Among these, two thirds initially chose the gold OA model, while one third chose the diamond OA model before transitioning to gold OA as the journal gained positive momentum. One editor of a gold OAJ explained, “In the beginning, we did not charge authors and managed publication costs ourselves. However, after joining SCI, submission and publication volumes increased, and we were unable to cover all costs, so we began charging authors”. (04ENGF) Furthermore, one journal actively chose the gold OA model because the editor-in-chief believed that OA could enhance the journal’s international influence and expand its dissemination, contributing to its long-term development.

In the 11 English-language journals, the boards of 10 journals are currently collaborating with international publishers. The editors of these journals have emphasized the significant benefits of such collaborations for their daily operations and long-term development. One editor provided an example, stating that “co-publishers have highly experienced and professional teams with extensive knowledge in areas such as database applications. As a result, the co-publishers are involved in the entire process, helping the journals to evaluate and identify important considerations, leading to a higher success rate”. (12 ENGF)

Uniquely, there is one journal that has chosen not to cooperate with international publishers. Instead, its aim is to “build its own ship to go to sea” rather than “borrow a ship to go to sea”. According to the editor, “When working with international publishers, the journal databases are hosted on their platform and all APCs are handed over to them. Firstly, this is not good for the security of our data. Secondly, if China’s scientific journals want to achieve great development, we need our own platform and completely independent journals. Thirdly, there are many restrictions on cooperation with international publishers, such as the difficulty of adopting a personalized model and highlighting our own unique features due to their uniform restriction processes”. (12 ENGF) The journal has been operating by drawing upon the experience and standards of other international journals and collaborating with excellent technical teams. However, due to a lack of sufficient experience and clear guidelines, they are

facing significant challenges at each step of the way.

5. Conclusions

Although we have collected a significant amount of primary data on the perceptions, practices, attitudes, and opinions of Chinese editors regarding OA, there is still room to enhance the size and complexity of our research sample to increase the reliability of our conclusions. Therefore, we plan to expand our approach to the editors of scientific journals across various disciplines to gain deeper insights into OA practices and their impacts. By doing so, we aim to generate a more comprehensive and detailed research outcome.

The survey results indicate that while most Chinese editors have a basic understanding of OA, they lack comprehensive knowledge of it. For example, some editors of English-language journals are unable to distinguish between open access and open science principles, and some editors of Chinese-language journals are unable to accurately differentiate or define the various OA modes. Our research suggests that Chinese editors have limited access to international OA information, and the information provided by domestic experts may not align with current global practices, making it challenging for editors to stay up-to-date with the latest information about OA. Editors see both the advantages and disadvantages of OA, with a greater number of editors having a positive attitude towards it. They recognize that OA can enhance the dissemination and utilization of journals, thereby boosting their influence. However, the editors have also identified several disadvantages of OA, some of which are not inherent to OA itself, but rather stem from predatory journals and researchers' low awareness of OA.

Chinese-language and English-language journals differ significantly in their approaches to OA. Most Chinese-language journals have adapted to the current mechanism and are able to develop steadily within this environment. However, transitioning to OA requires significant changes and investment, with no guarantee of reward. As a result, most journals are not inclined to make the switch. In many cases, the editors did not deliberately decide to adopt OA, but rather stumbled upon it while developing their journals. Some editors believe that changing the mechanism of journal publishing or mandating OA policies could be effective ways to promote OA.

English-language journals have largely adopted OA in response to global trends and requirements from international publishers, with the majority operating under the gold OA model. However, newly launched journals with adequate financial support may find the diamond OA model more suitable until they achieve sufficient influence. Nonetheless, English-language journals present a practical challenge: how can they “build ships to go to sea” when “borrowing ships to go to sea” has already yielded significant benefits? Is it necessary for them to collaborate with international publishers to survive and develop, or can they publish independently and still achieve success in the global market?

Given the unique background of academic publishing in China, while China has been following the international OA progress in recent years and referring to OA actions of other countries, most editors believe that there are still significant differences between China and other countries. Many editors are debating whether China's scientific journals can develop an OA path with distinctive Chinese characteristics. Additionally, they are exploring the possibility of creating an international platform similar to DOAJ while meeting the

unique features of China's journals. However, the unique path of OA development in China requires further exploration and experimentation.

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