

How to establish a first-class international scientific journal in China?

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Abstract

Hundreds of scientific journals are published in China. However, only scores of them are included in Science Citation Index by the Institute for Scientific Information, with impact factors of only 1 or less. Thus, how to establish a first-class international scientific journal in China is an important but difficult topic that deserves extensive exploration. *World Journal of Gastroenterology (WJG)* sets a good example although it has experienced setbacks on the road towards success. Concepts and pursuits that affirm the overall development direction, innovation and dreams that provide impetus and aspiration for higher objectives, team work and unique pattern that assure excellent quality and service, and culture and environment that also determine the speed and direction of the development, are believed to be the major factors contributing to the success of *WJG*. It is recommended that the effective resolution to the above issue is to learn from Chinese examples such as *WJG* rather than from "how foreign journals do".

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INTRODUCTION

In 2005, China Ministry of Science and Technology organized and implemented a research project on "How

to establish a first-class international scientific journal in China". This issue is indeed an important but difficult topic that deserves extensive exploration. Both the editorial workers and the administrative authorities of scientific journals should seriously respond to it. In the meantime, I believe that the effective resolution to this issue is to learn from "Chinese cases" rather than from "how foreign journals do".

World Journal of Gastroenterology (WJG) was formally established by Dr. Lian-Sheng Ma on October 1, 1995. As an administrative leader of the Science Committee of Shanxi Province which is in charge of scientific journals, I have witnessed the growth and development of *WJG* over the past 12 years, but never made any public comments on the journal. Today, I wish to make some points by incorporating the *WJG* case into the above mentioned topic.

CONCEPTS AND PURSUITS

As a macroeconomist, I know nothing about scientific journals. However, I am astonished to find that many journals have the same weaknesses as enterprises do. Some experts have reported that many Chinese enterprises suffer from "short-life syndrome" with an average lifespan of 2.9 years. It has also been said that some large Chinese corporations suffer from "small enterprise disease" characterized by severe opportunism in the strategic plan, lack of supporting sections in organization structure, collaboration inside the teams, and the uniform core values of the corporation. Similarly, it has been said that Chinese scientific journals are in short of creative and innovative papers, and abundant in third-class and "cloned" papers, which not only is a great waste of academic resources but also results in an extremely bad impact on scientific development in China. In my opinion, Chinese scientific journals share one common weakness, i.e. lack of concept and pursuit. This is just like the situation in Shanxi Province, where the negative impact driven by so-called resource economy has become increasingly obvious. Unauthorized mining, frequent mine explosion, vicious competition and corruption all can be attributed to the lack of concepts. Shanxi economy is an example that is cursed by "its resources". The misfortune resulting from the lack of concepts is shown by the horrible economic development without any conceptual restriction. Similarly, the development of scientific journals without any conceptual restriction is disastrous since it brings about enormous scientific "rubbish" and academic corruption,

which is known as “concept-lacking syndrome” in China.

Concepts mean belief, pursuits, and direction. Its core is the concept of values. The world well-known United States Military Academy at West Point has a history of over 200 years. The Academy's special educational concepts are “nation, honor and responsibility”, which represent the spirit of nation, honor for society, team and personal responsibility. With such concepts, the Academy has educated two presidents (Ulysses S. Grant and Dwight D. Eisenhower), many famous generals, and a lot of business leaders. Whether an entrepreneur pursues a career or profits is the criterion to judge his/her personality. What is the objective to establish an academic journal? I said to Dr. Ma 10 years ago that “You should not be involved in any academic journal if you just want to make money”. He got what I meant very clearly. Frankly, I did not believe he was able to establish an academic journal at that time because he lacked resources. Moreover, I did not understand his intention or ambition. On the one hand, he was already a famous doctor, and made a lot of money from his herbal inventions at that time, and thus could live a very comfortable life. On the other hand, it requires quantities of human and financial resources to take many risks to establish an academic journal. To choose establishing an academic journal as a career means hard work, suffering and even tears.

With high quality and excellent service as his concepts, Dr. Ma has devoted himself to and sacrificed a lot for *WJG*. As a man in his forties, his hair has turned grey. Fortunately, he finally succeeded. In the article entitled “The reasons for *WJG*'s success”, which describes that the ultimate criterion to test a scientific journal is whether or not researchers in the field put it in their reading list. *WJG* has now successfully passed the criterion. *WJG* is an open and free international journal, and also the only weekly journal in gastroenterology in the world. The latest published papers in *WJG* are always sent to doctors and researchers free of charge by email. In addition, an average of about 30 000 online visits to the *WJG* website is recorded every day.

WJG has proposed a higher objective. At present 47 journals in Gastroenterology worldwide are included in the Science Citation Index Expanded (SCI-E). These first-class journals are also classified into three grades. Dr. Ma plans to invest one hundred million Yuan to make *WJG* an upper-middle level journal among these journals within 5 to 10 years. He is exploring a unique way to establish an international first-class scientific journal in China with persistent pursuits for quality and services.

INNOVATION AND DREAM

Almost all the industries find it hard to adapt to the new environment in which there is a changing process from an industrialized society to a knowledgeable society, and do not know what to do next. I attended a recent forum on education reform during which a Japanese expert introduced education reform in Japan. “The most lacking nowadays are concepts and ideas” he said emotionally. It is really difficult to depict the pattern or model of scientific journals in the future. It was reported in a survey

that only less than 5% Chinese enterprises have made a professionally-standard, complete and feasible strategically developed plan by scientific means. More than 90% of companies have no long term plan on how to survive. There is a famous byword at Harvard University, that is, a successful man is distinguished not due to his knowledge and experience, but due to his way of thinking. It has been said that the future cannot be forecasted or adapted, but can only be created. What is a first-class international scientific journal in China? This question can only be thought and answered by ourselves. Creativity is always limited by knowledge, experience and way of thinking. As a president of a publisher or an editor-in-chief of a journal, one must have the specific ability to shape innovative thinking, and to improve his thinking to a higher level.

Over the past decade, the most that Dr. Ma and I have discussed is the creativity of *WJG*. Dr. Ma telephoned me almost every week after my retirement, telling me his new ideas, from the administrative system to the flow remodeling, from scientific editing to electronic editing, from human resources to the internal structure management, and from exiting journals to resource integration in the same field. He is pursuing innovation in every aspect of editing a journal, which is the major reason that I have been greatly interested in *WJG*. On January 9, 2006, President Jin-Tao Hu pointed out at the National Congress of Science and Technology that China shall become a country with innovation in the next 15 years. This is a new starting point to a new road. Now officials in every industry are thinking about the issue on how to exploit a path with independence, innovation and Chinese characteristics. Then, how to establish an international first-class scientific journal in China? Taking the laggard reality in China into consideration, I would suggest that innovation must be comprehensive and systematic, rather than individualized, revolutionary, and evolving, in order to catch up or even overtake the international levels. Moreover, innovation in the administrative system is much more important than innovation in technology. I believe that one can find all answers to the question if he/she sticks to the two principles of innovation.

Now *WJG* Press, based on the current achievements and experience, is building an innovative system that includes journals as the main body, and the laboratory and pharmaceutical companies as supporting points, and is exploring a new model that combines journal publication with manufacturing, education and research. Dr. Ma always tries hard to make the best *WJG* once he identifies the right way, with the strategic design and practical implementation being carried on almost at the same time. *WJG* was publicly issued on June 29, 1995 as a seasonal journal. It became bimonthly from 1998 to 2002, monthly in 2003, biweekly in 2004, and then weekly in 2005, with one big jump each year over the last three years. Despite such significant achievements, I described each jump as the “thrilling jump” (Karl Max). I have warned Dr. Ma that if the jumping failed, the injured would be Dr. Ma himself but not *WJG*. Fortunately, Dr. Ma succeeded. Now he is thinking how to integrate resources of the famous journals in the field, and is planning to publish *World Journal of Oncology* and *World Journal of Chinese Medicine*, and to create a

broader platform for medical communications. In this way, an innovative chain will be created to optimize resource allocation, just like the supply chain management in the enterprises. I believe that he will succeed again this time since the innovation will not be limited in one journal or one step, and thus will improve the whole academic level.

TEAM AND PATTERN

Only a first-class team can publish first-class journals. The *WJG* editorial board is composed of 760 experts in gastroenterology from 52 countries. Many famous scientists have been invited to write reviews and editorials for *WJG*. Its permanent editorial team is composed of those outstanding staff with doctors, masters of bachelor degree, and has become more competitive and efficient.

There were some bad comments at the beginning of *WJG* when there were not many resources such as financial support for journals from the government and experienced editors. There was a doubt on the success of *WJG* that was run by an "individual". Sometimes, I wonder how many emergent novelties have been killed by such an attitude and way of thinking. Everything has its own developing and improving process, which is from small to large and from weak to strong. The Editor-in-Chief is the key to a journal, just like an entrepreneur to an enterprise. A recent book "The World Is Flat" by an American writer, Thomas L. Friedman, describes that the world has become smaller and smaller. In the opinion of the author, the world has experienced three "shrinking" processes. The first one took place in the fourteenth century, and is characterized by the expansion of countries. At that time, Columbus discovered the New Continent, which opened the sea route and thus reduced the distances between countries. The second one took place in the industrial revolution, and is characterized by the expansion of enterprises (multinational corporations). At that time, the development and production of the railway, electricity and telecommunication instruments further reduced the size of the world. The third one is taking place now following the significant development of information network, and is characterized by the expansion of personal power. I heard recently that there is a news agency in the United States run by a single person. Therefore, we should not underestimate or ignore the ability of any individuals. To some extent, even an individual is able to influence the whole world.

Composition of a team is always influenced by the strategic orientation and the tactical policy, and restricted by the administration system and operation mechanisms. *WJG* has two principles. One principle is to operate according to the international standards. Dr. Ma has described to us the general situation of international standards and market operation patterns in 15 aspects, such as administrative system, editing criteria, paper quality, online submission, invitations for editorials and reviews on highlighted topics, peer review, external communications, printing and distribution, etc. This year, 75.8% of manuscripts submitted to *WJG* were from authors outside of China. The other principle is to improve with informatization. In some senses,

internationalization means internet communications. *WJG* always improves continuously its business flow in order to match its administration pattern with informatization. I read a worksheet about the editing process of *WJG*, which is composed of 29 steps for scientific editing, 36 steps for electronic editing, and more than 10 other basic steps. Scientific and strict regulations and operational patterns are the basis of a successful *WJG*. The quality of a journal must be improved with time, and its development must represent the changing world. Unfortunately, some journals are still run with the management pattern designed for the outdated planned economy. These journals lack in vitality and compatibility despite abundant human resources and financial support. Now is the time when live fish eat dead fish, and fast fish eat slow fish, but not necessarily big fish eat small fish. This is due to the choice of the market rather than the instruction of government. I used to recommend the pattern of *WJG* to some of my friends in the field. They all made good comments on the pattern but could not learn from it very well. Structure and administrative pattern are determined by the system. Therefore, it is the issue of the system that we must resolve before we find an international first-class scientific journal in China.

CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT

A journal, or an enterprise or a university, or an institute, or even a development zone can only grow in a certain culture and environment. They are all the products of the culture and environment. Why is the United States of America so strong? Is it just because of its military power and technology? No, it is because of its culture based on its democratic construction and citizen quality. Michael Bott, a famous American scholar has pointed out that the advantage that is based on culture is the most difficult to copy or replace, the most fundamental, the most everlasting and thus the most pivotal advantage in competition. China is investigating how to develop the "middle part" these days. Some experts believe that the key to developing the "middle part" is reshaping of the local culture. What I learned from the growing process of *WJG* is that some aspects of our culture really need improvement. Some government officials created difficulties for *WJG*, and some authorities turned their noses at *WJG*. In addition, some "readers" abused *WJG* or even insulted the publisher with whatever words they could create on the internet, such as "*WJG* is a bad journal", "I feel shamed that my paper is published in *WJG*". What kind of culture is it where you cannot do anything? Who are the victims of such a culture? We must have courage to reflect and animadvert on the outdated culture, and investigate these details in depth in order to found an international first-class scientific journal. One may get some insight from the book "Details Determine the Success".

The culture in the Silicon Valley or the Tech-Garden of Zhongguan Village is non-traditional. Individual behavior is determined by the profits and dreams. There is no authority or god. There are only heroes from commonality. So Silicon Valley is the place for youngsters to begin their career, to carve out, and to realize their dreams. Persons in Silicon Valley always respect losers, because they know

that the losers have taken the risks and paved the path for the victors towards the hi-tech peak. Mistakes and failures are unavoidable in its growing process. *WJG* was refused to be included in SCI in 2004 and 2005, which was a big blow to Dr. Ma. He made intensive investigations, and found out the reasons. The *WJG* self citation rate of 94%, which was rather high and made its impact factor up to 2.532 in 2002, was the major reason for the refusal. High impact factor and compositor were usually induced by high self citation rate, which resulted in a misleading of the influence of *WJG* in the field. Dr. Ma reduced its self citation rate to 15.87% in 2005, and fortunately *WJG* recovered by SCI this year. This is probably a good lesson. In addition to Dr. Ma's hard work, the success of *WJG* is also attributed to the support from some related authorities, such as China Ministry of Science and Technology, National Administration of News and Publication, Natural Science Foundation Committee of Shanxi Province, and many experts and readers. Professor Fa-Zu Qiu, member of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, aged 93, and Mr. Xu-E Li, former vice-director of China National Science and Technology Committee, both gave *WJG* tremendous support. Thus, *WJG* is very fortunate to have such support. We must learn from the growing process of the international first-class scientific journals if we want to found such a journal. The processes are always more splendid than results. Every time when *WJG* steps forward, I would remind Dr. Ma that happiness of success is temporary while the suffering and challenging are everlasting. Indeed, the most valuable personality of modern entrepreneurs is willingness to pursue "suffering" and challenge.

I have studied a book "Laws Cannot Change the Society: How to Reform France", written by a famous French sociologist, Michel Crozier. In his opinion, with the development of society, communication between individuals becomes more and more complicated, the society becomes more and more fragile, and thus the outdated social administrative systems become weaker and weaker and the laws can no longer resolve the social problems. The impetus of the society is the human resources, especially those intellectuals with great potentials. Only by motivating their enthusiasm, can the

social reform be performed. Generally, those who are engaged in scientific journals are the nation's backbone.

In April 2006, *WJG* held the first working meeting of the year. I was initially invited to give a lecture on the relation between morality and quality, but I was unable to attend the meeting. Later, Dr. Ma told me an interesting story. One day he attended lectures on two topics delivered by Professor Wu-Zong Zhou from University of St. Andrews, St. Andrews, the United Kingdom. The first topic was "Why to Publish Scientific Papers", and the second one was "Strict Academician Attitude Ensures the Quality of Scientific Papers". During the lecture, someone raised a comment, saying "we are coming here to learn how to write papers, not to accept moral education". Surprisingly, about two thirds of the audience applauded for the comment. Professor Zhou shook his head and could not say anything. So did I after I heard the story. There is an extensive debate on the comparison of the development between China and India in recent two years. Some people believe that intellectual community which represents the advanced productivity is better qualified in India than in China. The former American President Bill Clinton also holds this viewpoint. Last year, I read an article by Dr. Nan-Ping Yuan, the consul general of the Chinese Consulate in Bombay, India. The title was "What Is stronger in India than in China?". It describes that Indian intellectuals are determined to retain their independent personality with consistency and conscience. They do not compromise to obtain any benefits. They sympathize and help the weak. They possess excellent academic quality, without flippancy and the urge for a quick success and an instant benefit. They rarely have the concepts such as "job-hopping" and "becoming official and making money" in mind. I believe that all these characteristics that Indian intellectuals possess are the core compatibility that a journal or a region requires.

WJG has represented China to compete on the international academic stage without any national financial support. Many experts and scientists in Western countries praise this kind of intellectual such as Dr. Ma as "scientific fighters" and "academic faeries". At least, we should show our sympathy and respect to those who dedicate themselves to their national academy.

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