

# Reflections on the Use of SSCI Papers in Evaluating Social Sciences Research in Chinese Universities

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This review demonstrates how to position Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) papers reasonably in order to promote the reform and development of the system for evaluating social sciences research (E-SSR) in China.

**Design/Approach/Methods:** This review examines the contributions made by SSCI papers after such papers became a tool in the E-SSR system in Chinese universities, and the resultant issues. This review analyzes documents pertaining to the E-SSR systems of more than 50 world-class universities with consideration to the inherent characteristics and historical mission of social sciences research in China. The findings serve as the basis from which to examine the future trends in the reform of the E-SSR system in Chinese universities.

**Findings:** The application of SSCI papers as an E-SSR tool is not common in world-class universities. To date, the reform of the E-SSR system in Chinese universities has involved: (i) establishing a pluralistic evaluation mechanism, with equal importance placed on SSCI papers and other research achievements; (ii) emphasizing the need for caution in using SSCI papers as an E-SSR tool and instituting distinct treatments for various disciplines; (iii) reducing the importance attached to journal language and ranking, while emphasizing innovation quality and practical contributions; and

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(iv) establishing China's E-SSR standards in order to achieve an equilibrium between internationalization and localization.

**Originality/Value:** This review argues that although SSCI papers constitute an indicator of E-SSR system, their importance must not be overstated. The main purpose of the E-SSR system is to facilitate the development of social sciences with a style and characteristics unique to China.

### **Keywords**

Reform trends, scientific research evaluation system, social sciences in China, SSCI papers

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## **The value of SSCI papers in China's E-SSR system**

In recent years, Chinese universities have used institutional regulations to guide and encourage the publication of SSCI papers by their faculty members. Universities also use the number of papers as a yardstick to evaluate the academic levels of faculty members and disciplines. In the social sciences, SSCI papers have become the basis of talent recruitment, evaluation of professional titles, and awarding of scientific research grants.

Chinese universities have begun releasing the number of SSCI-indexed papers published by their various faculties and departments as well as the frequency with which these papers were cited. In China, the role of SSCI is not just a database for scientific researchers, but an important standard for the E-SSR system and related achievements (Dang, 2005). Moreover, many Chinese universities treat SSCI and CSSCI papers differently when awarding the publication of papers, such that "the award amount for an SSCI paper published in an international journal is usually several times, or even ten to twenty times, more than that for a local CSSCI paper" (Xu & Jiang, 2018, p. 49). This reflects the premium status of SSCI papers within the E-SSR system in Chinese universities.

## **Impact of introducing SSCI papers into China's E-SSR system**

Although the SSR level of a country (or particular scientific research institution or scholar) cannot be accurately measured using the number of SSCI papers published, this indicator reflects its international status within a research field to a large extent (Kousha & Thelwall, 2007). As such, introducing SSCI into China's E-SSR system and encouraging faculty members to publish papers in international journals have contributed to the internationalization of SSR in the country. On the one hand, the international academic impact of Chinese social sciences has increased, facilitating the transformation of "silent China" into "China with a voice" (Liu, 2019, p. 111). The standardization of the country's academic research paradigm and improvement in the academic rationality of research have also contributed to this shift (Liu & Ding, 2014).

On the other hand, the excessive reliance on SSCI papers has created several issues that cannot be ignored, including a lack of in-depth research into Chinese real social problems. As Liu and Ding (2014) note, “When selecting topics to write papers for publication in SSCI journals, scholars from China were more inclined towards popular issues that western countries were concerned about” (p. 88). According to Qin and Zhang (2008), a desire to be published in English journals and to attract the attention of foreign academic journals resulted in three phenomena: First, Chinese scholars began researching topics currently studied by Americans; second, they began studying local issues of interest to Americans; third, they began interpreting local issues through direct recourse to Western theories. Consequently, many local studies have become a database for American research or evidence of the applicability of Western theories in the Chinese context. As a result, Qin and Zhang (2008) note, “the local issues that really need to be studied and solved were frequently ignored” (p. 8).

Therefore, although the publication of SSCI papers offers rich rewards for scientific research, research has failed to meet the country’s social development needs. In this respect, emphasis on publishing SSCI papers has made “scholars mistakenly equate internationalization with a high quality level, thus weakening the role of scientific research at serving the country’s development” (Liu & Ding, 2014, p. 91). Exaggerating the evaluative function of SSCI papers and placing this indicator at such a “supreme” position in the evaluation system have also led to a discrimination against the publication of papers in Chinese (Chou, 2014, p. 12).

## **Discussion**

The world-class universities of other countries rarely apply SSCI papers as an E-SSR tool. A review of faculty member handbooks of 54 world-class universities, including Harvard University and Stanford University, reveals no mention of SSCI papers in respect to promotion, tenure, or performance assessment. In contrast, the corresponding guidelines for faculty members in the social sciences in Chinese institutions almost always include SSCI papers. Drawing on the experiences of other countries, as well as the developmental characteristics of the social sciences in China and the reality of its E-SSR system, this review proposes the following reform directions for China’s E-SSR system.

### ***Establish a pluralistic evaluation mechanism, with equal importance placed on SSCI papers and other research achievements***

In world-class universities, both print and nonprint research achievements are considered for promotion, tenure, and performance assessment. In this respect, published papers are just one form of print achievements. For instance, Texas State University’s College of Education considers 10 categories of print materials—including books, articles, conference proceedings,

abstracts, reports, and book reviews—when evaluating promotions. Books comprise five sub-categories: scholarly monographs, textbooks, edited books, chapters in books, and creative books. Articles published in both refereed and non-refereed journals are also included (Texas State University, 2018).

In addition to SSCI papers, the status of other forms of achievement—including academic monographs, consulting reports, textbooks, and translations—should be enhanced in the E-SSR system of Chinese universities. Instead of giving supremacy to papers, especially SSCI papers, a pluralistic evaluation mechanism should be established. As Chen (2011) argues, if Chinese scholars wish to step out onto the world stage without being overbearing or self-effacing, they must first “improve their personal abilities and strive to improve the overall academic level. They should remain patient, work hard, spend a decade boosting their strength, and another decade heeding lessons from the past and training conscientiously. By the time a large number of works embracing an international perspective and local sentiments have accumulated, the goal of internationalizing Chinese academia will be achieved naturally” (p. 66).

### *Apply SSCI papers as an E-SSR tool with caution and institute distinct treatments for various disciplines*

In their empirical study, Klein and Chiang (2004) confirm that SSCI cannot accurately reflect the quality of published results as well as the existence of obvious ideological biases. As a result of the uneven distribution of disciplines, the use of SSCI has produced numerous biases in overall E-SSR (Chu et al., 2003). The SSCI contains the lowest number of ethnological journals, but the highest number of psychological journals. Indeed, due to its inclination and preference, SSCI cannot provide fair evaluations for academic research in the fields of modern languages and literature or theories of socialism with Chinese characteristics (Zhuo, 2011). It is necessary to recognize that the SSCI’s uneven distribution of disciplines prevent its application to all disciplines in the social sciences. Accordingly, SSCI should be used discriminately according to the characteristics and particularities of individual disciplines.

### *Reduce the importance of language used and journal ranking, and emphasize innovation quality and actual contributions*

This article reviews the recruitment and promotional literature of 54 world-class universities, finding that their evaluation standards primarily emphasizes originality, high accomplishment level and quality, as well as potential. For example, the criteria for lifelong tenure in Harvard University’s Faculty of Arts and Sciences include scholarly achievement and impact on the field, evidence of intellectual leadership and creative accomplishment, potential for future accomplishments, and potential contribution to the university and broader scholarly community (Harvard University,

2012). The evaluation standards focused on faculty members' level of achievements in scientific research and the influence of those achievements. Essentially, these criteria have nothing to do with the journals in which faculty members' papers were published or the language in which they were written. According to Li (2020), "The specific journal that published the paper, the language of the paper, the amount of attention garnered after publication and the ways the attention was given—all these have no bearing on the scientific value of knowledge innovation, and should not be misinterpreted as standards for evaluating scientific research" (p. 13). Therefore, China's E-SSR system should downplay the language used and journal ranking, and shift the actual evaluation foci to innovation quality and practical contribution.

### *Establish China's standards of E-SSR with the aim of achieving an equilibrium between internationalization and localization*

In terms of the nature of the various disciplines, the natural sciences constitute a pure knowledge system that emphasizes value neutrality. In contrast, the social sciences comprise a broad duality: namely, a knowledge system and an ideology (Yang, 2017). In this sense, there are "borders" within the social sciences (Zhuo, 2011, p. 9). The famous sociologist Xiaotong Fei advocated cultural awareness in later life. This idea is particularly important for the development of social sciences in China. Summarizing the course of cultural awareness, Fei (1997) claimed that "Every form of beauty has its uniqueness; it is precious to appreciate other forms of beauty with openness. When beauty is represented by diversity and integrity, the world will be blessed with harmony and unity" (p. 22).

In this respect, we need to identify the unique advantages and inherent characteristics of China's social sciences and develop these through self-reflection. Instead of blindly looking up to others, we should "step out" with our own unique stance. We must self-adapt to the global perspective, and engage in equal exchange and mutual growth with other cultures in creating a global civilization where "beauty is represented by diversity and integrity." China's E-SSR system should serve the purpose of "building social sciences with the characteristics and a style and imposing manner that are unique to the country, but are also of universal significance" (Yang, 2017). In the process of internationalizing the social sciences, China's E-SSR standards should be formulated to achieve an equilibrium between internationalization and localization.

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