



China is the new academic (and selfie) frontier. I know this because I spent eight weeks in the last two years in many parts of China as a lecturer, a keynote speaker, and presenting publication seminars. I tried to avoid the selfie craze, mainly because it damages the skin and I resist being a celebrity. The experience of being mobbed by enthusiastic delegates with selfie sticks and smartphone cameras after completing a presentation is quite bewildering.

Like with selfies (been there, done that!), China's fast trains (400km/h) are a metaphor for its desire for high speed inclusion in global academic discussions (getting there). Intercultural communication, business linguistics and English-language competence are top of the national agenda as China 'goes abroad' following its rapid rise to global prominence economically, militarily and diplomatically. Its scholars are making sense of the West by mining and rigorously reading, critiquing, deconstructing and reconstituting the seminal Western philosophers and theorists, from Hegel to (Stuart) Hall. They are finding new ways of reading them, historicising them, synergising between them and linking them to current geopolitical concerns.

But like us in South Africa, Chinese academia is also entrapped in the limited horizons imposed by mindless publication-o-phobia led by managers who themselves rarely publish.

Where we have our own flawed God, SAPSE/DoHET, China has selected SSCI and A&HCI (Web of Science [WoS]) as its benchmark for quality publishing. SSCI is an indicator of specific sets of extrinsic inter-journal quality, and not necessarily the intrinsic relevance of particular journals. In offering seminars on publication across the country under the auspices of *Critical Arts: South-North Cultural and Media Studies* which I edit, I was constantly drawing correspondences between China and South Africa. Both systems are populated with bewildered emergent academics being told to publish, where to publish, but rarely *how* or *what* to publish, or whether their work even merits publication.

As China tries to understand the West - marketisation, cultural logics, language in context, international regulatory regimes - authors need exposure to, and in, the English-speaking world. So they are pushed to read and publish in what they call 'SSCI Journals'. Back home, the University of Johannesburg, for example, ring fences high impact WoS titles for higher rewards than those listed only on IBSS and DoHET. This internal ranking monetises research output and distracts from 'doing' and 'impacting' into 'earning' and is linked to international ranking, which brings its own benefits and negative externalities.

In China, there is no SAPSE-type reward system, but the above indexes are the Gods of its research regulation. So much so that young authors think that SSCI is the owner and publisher of tens of thousands of journals. SSCI is for most Chinese scholars a mysterious and reified entity that can be the open sesame to their future careers.

Difficult as it was for me to convince my vast audiences that SSCI is but an index, that's all that SSCI publishes. It is not a journals publisher; it does not recruit or edit content, or engage in peer review of submissions nor determine journals' policies or administration. Not all journals are indexed by WoS. Not all journals want WoS listings; and WoS does not want to index all journals. WoS is just

one overarching system of different indexes, if the most prominent one. One Canadian scholar in Shanghai said he'd never heard of SSCI until he arrived there. I suggested that WoS (i.e. Thompson Reuters) be invited to address publication workshops in the future to explain what it does do, does not do, and how it aids in the international circulation of academic work.

WoS is English-speaking, while the Chinese have their own listing for articles written in Chinese. Chinese journals are published by university presses. If authors get no response after three months, they consider the article rejected. Western journals are more professional in actually communicating a decision.

Personally, I don't write so that bureaucrats can tick boxes, for indexes or for research payouts. I write for readerships, communities of scholars whom I want to reach, impact and engage. Indexes simply offer exposure for work published. And besides, there are many other indexes but their metrics don't all garner the same attention as do Scopus and WoS.

Metrics are the neoliberal equivalent of measuring imagined value that discriminates on the basis of immediacy, sometimes based on non-value. For example, in maths, one of the highest cited articles was because later scholars redid the calculations and found the findings to be wrong, not right. Such articles are pilloried in the scientific literature but get 'high impact' value. Now, such hapless authors are retracting flawed articles - but the electronic trace remains.

Metrics, while indicating immediacy, rarely recognise the latent longevity of intrinsic value such as in the Humanities. Such articles might languish for years un-valorised before their value is recognized by subsequent generations of scholars who find value in older work. Similarly, for historians in any discipline, intrinsic value never decays, but increases over time. Metrics, which are simply marketing and currency devices, are causing academics to engage in short-term thinking, doing fast-'n-dirty publishing, rather than longer-term blue-sky research, from which really applicable scientific and social benefit might eventually occur – e.g., DNA sequencing, electric cars, vaccination, the atomic bomb (regrettably). It took over 100 years for semiotics to become a standard cross-disciplinary method, with undergraduate media studies, language, literature and biology, as just some examples.

As I whizzed along the Chinese air, taxi and rail transport systems, I learned about the safety, organisational efficiencies and economies of scale that some political systems can deliver. Eskom and SABC were once such entities. The selfie and absorbed screen culture indicates digital connectivity, a growing (tele-) individuality, of an increasingly consumer-oriented society, certainly in the huge cities. But it also promises immediate claims to fame, publishing and career success. Some thinking - like research and publishing - take time, sometimes a lifetime. Selfies are instant and dermatologically harmful. Universities need to eschew instant gratification. After three days of instruction on how to write an article, some lecturers still asked, but how do I get published? That is, which buttons on the screen do we press for instant returns?

· Keyan Tomaselli is Distinguished Professor at the University of Johannesburg. He learned that there are many such professors in China.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author's own.