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# Bureaucratic and Neoliberal Management in Academia : A Franco-Chinese Dialogue between Two Anthropologists

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**Abstract**

This dialogue was first launched as an informal, off the cut discussion on a vast array of topics, we then both continued the discussion remotely, swinging the text back and forth to refine arguments and push further the reflection. The choice to keep the original structure of the discussion entails a quite long piece, coming back in some parts to similar topics but from various angles. Understanding downside of time-consuming readings, we humbly think that this timely subject deserves such development. Here is a roadmap of this dialogue: We first explore the training of students emphasising systemic structures possibly harmful to critical thinking development. Then, the pression of publication from Master degree to professorship in China is discussed pointing out serious flaws such evaluation system induces. In the third part we present the few decades old academic points system in China. We discuss its origin, the “points’ world view” generalisation and show how problematic are the current indicators, on which rely recruitment, evaluation and the calculation of the salary, failing in nurturing stimulating and creative academic work. Hence representing a serious threat for our profession. The following parts discusses targeted research topics and assigned tasks from the government as well as national projects selection. They highlight different kinds of posture scholars take to survive and even thrive in such system. After few reflexions on integrity and possibility to change the academic system, the dialogue ends on the vision for Chinese Anthropology and the social role of social sciences.

Pitfalls in the current academia system mentioned here are not all associated to the neoliberal management turn and the capitalisation worldview but can be brought about by Kafkian bureaucracy as well as old and deeply anchored scholar practices. This dialogue is not all about criticism though, we try to be productive by proposing or identifying inspiring suggestion from colleagues, both at the systemic and the individual level.

# **Bureaucratic and Neoliberal Management in Academia : A Franco-Chinese Dialogue between Two Anthropologists**

By Tang Yun, Katiana Le Mentec and Camille Noûs

## **Outline**

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## **Introduction**

The following text is the outcome of a series of exchanges between Tang Yun and Katiana Le Mentec on the Chinese and French Academic Systems. The dialogue was first launched during a 90-minutes recorded discussion on the 10th of February 2020, in the midst of the growing mobilization in the French academia against two new laws, one restructuring the retirement contribution system on a points-based system, and another one, the “Multi-Annual Research Programming Act” (loi de programmation pluriannuelle de la recherche – LPPR later renamed LPR), reinforcing the bureaucratization/ auditing /neoliberal turn in the French academic system following the vision first designed in the Bologna Declaration that was signed by 29 European countries in 1999 (Calame 2011)<sup>1</sup>. At the time, Tang Yun and her husband Zhang Yuan, both ethnology professors at the South-West Minzu University (Chengdu, PRC), were included in the visiting researcher’s program at the EHESS for one month to Katiana’s invitation. These three anthropologists were no strangers to each other. After a first encounter in Chengdu in Autumn of 2014, they kept in close contact and have collaborated on an array of shared interest. Their relationship is better framed in term of friendship, and from a Chinese point of

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<sup>1</sup> The bureaucratization, regimes of accountability and audit marking the neoliberal era have had a profound effect on academia around the world (Readings 1996, Strathern 2000, Shore; Wright 2004, Brenneis; Shore; Wright 2005, Gill 2009, Shore 2009, 2010, Graeber 2014, Granger 2015, Butler; Delaney; Sliwa 2017) and see also <https://allthelittleworlds.wordpress.com/2015/01/12/the-effects-of-neoliberalism-on-the-academy/>.

view in terms of *yuanfen* (缘份, predestined affinity) and parallel kinships (fraternity), than in merely professional networking or *guanxi*<sup>2</sup>.

It does not always feel decent to complain about the French Academic system to colleagues who are trying to survive in more oppressive systems than ours, oppressive not necessarily in terms of financial resources – many countries provide far more generous salaries, working conditions, tools and operating budgets to teachers and researchers in academia than France – but in regards to the fierce advancement of neoliberal management measures: The notion of excellence is omnipresent; evaluation is based on purely quantitative thresholds; contractualisation, injunctions and goals are rampant; the project-based research system dominates; research topics are targeted on a short-term basis; the ideology of international “stars” leads to and reinforces an old-fashioned and highly hierarchical mandarin regime; the policy of “publish or perish” prevails, and so on. When Katiana proposed to her Chinese friends and colleagues to introduce to each other the limits of their respective academic system over a cup of tea, the aim was to go beyond the usual stories and feelings we are all used to sharing when we meet among colleagues from the academia. It was about considering the system as an organic whole, through a transversal lens, to reflect on the nuts and bolts, to try to acknowledge systemic forms and the roots of some problems<sup>3</sup>. The advantages of this approach were, especially in the context of the *Multi-Annual Research Programming Act*, to reflect upon what we could, in French academia, learn about other systems, and in particular the Chinese one, which, through its “Shanghai ranking”, represents and participates in this auditing turn in the international academia. While topics of discussion in western countries regarding the Chinese academic system have a tendency to concentrate on ideological censorship (for social sciences in particular) and practices of academic fraud, we tend to ignore the fact that the Chinese communist party launched, as early as 1993, measures (such as the 211 Program) that are precisely the aim of today’s French advocates of academia neoliberal reforms (so-called university “autonomy”<sup>4</sup>, contractualisation replacing public employment, quantitative indicators for evaluation, salary and bonuses associated to quantitatively identified results, and exacerbation of competition between actors and between institutions, project-based funding, identification of priority-fields by the ruling power for economical, social and political gains preferably short-termly applicable). To the point that we could provocatively ask if the French successive governments in the 21<sup>st</sup> century were not in fact aiming at a sinisation of the French Academic System<sup>5</sup>, even though social mobilisation in France clearly restrained its pace in the last 25 years.

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<sup>2</sup> In this text we will return to the Chinese notion of *guanxi* (关系), referring to interpersonal relationships (both personal and professional) and involving the idea of reciprocity. Dunning and Kim (2007) correctly note that *guanxi*, a major dynamic in Chinese society, refers to the concept of drawing on established connections in order to secure favours in personal relationships.

<sup>3</sup> We wish to stress that our area of expertise is not academia history, law and system. This dialogue is based on personal experiences and feelings as well as opinion relying on selected references from experts mentioned along the discussion. This paper is not based on research investigation and does not purport to be comprehensive and unbiased. The aim is to humbly share a reflection we had, from our perspective of “between junior and senior” secured scholars, and to modestly help circulate our concerns about the current state of the academia worldwide.

<sup>4</sup> On the differences of the French and Chinese notion of “University Autonomy” see Zhong and Hayhoe (1997).

<sup>5</sup> While we do not have the knowledge to develop further the issue, a study would be stimulating. Even though the Chinese Academic system reform in the 1990s might have been highly influenced by what was happening in America at the time (Readings 1996), in the context of the French public services, a comparison with the Chinese academic system instead of the American one might be useful.

further the reflection<sup>6</sup>. The choice to keep the original structure of the discussion entails a quite long piece, coming back in some parts to similar topics but from various angles. Understanding downside of time-consuming readings, we humbly think that this timely subject deserves such development. Here is a roadmap of this dialogue: We first explore the training of students emphasising systemic structures possibly harmful to critical thinking development. Then, the pressure of publication from Master degree to professorship in China is discussed pointing out serious flaws such evaluation system induces. In the third part we present the few decades old academic points system in China. We discuss its origin, the “points’ world view” generalisation and show how problematic are the current indicators, on which rely recruitment, evaluation and the calculation of the salary, failing in nurturing stimulating and creative academic work. Hence representing a serious threat for our profession. The following parts discusses targeted research topics and assigned tasks from the government as well as national projects selection. They highlight different kinds of posture scholars take to survive and even thrive in such system. After few reflexions on integrity and possibility to change the academic system, the dialogue ends on the vision for Chinese Anthropology and the social role of social sciences.

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*Tang Yun, what is first popping into your mind regarding the Chinese academic system?*

## **Part 1. Training: teaching critical thinking and changing the evaluation system**

I will start from the training of scholars in China, because for me that may be at the root of some problems of the academic system. We are trained through primary school, middle school and then high school. By the end of high school, students (at the age 17 or 18) are supposed to form a kind of knowledge frame and worldview. It is not that they just know some concepts; they should acquire a logic of the knowledge. However, in China, in high school, teaching is mainly based on various examinations that test how many concepts or formulations you remember instead of helping you understanding them. As a result, students are very ‘knowledgeable’ in high school but forget the knowledge soon after the examination because they did not establish a link between different knowledges.

*Isn't what you are talking about reminiscent of what has been pointed at as a pedagogical practice typically inherited from the Confucianist school of learning and in particular imperial examinations in China that required applicants to know by heart a selection of “classics”, to acquire a standardized and selected points of view and world-frame to best serve the Empire?*

Yes, this pedagogical way, based on examination to select candidates for the State bureaucracy, has been quite entrenched in the Chinese education system. It was supposed to allow access to office to anyone based on merits alone, but the examination protocol was clearly designed for a purpose that was not independent and critical thinking. However, it is not easy to erase in one century (the imperial examination was abolished in 1905) an education system that was enforced for two thousand years (since the Han Dynasty between 206AC and 220 BC). And when we got such a big population, it

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<sup>6</sup> The authors would like to warmly thank Mark Aymes and Joakim Parslow for the opportunity to publish this piece in the European Journal of Turkish Studies, as well as for their support and editing insight.

became even harder to establish an equal and just evaluation system. It is always a topic of discussion in China on establishing proper connection between the traditional and modern pedagogy. To make things simpler, I have to say most of us schooled in China were reduced to “points”, at the cost of missing the chance or the training to form a very independent way to think about the world. It is really problematic and quite frankly also very sad. We of course gradually got academic training in college. It is never late to start academic work, but we really spent too much time on scores in our most creative age. I believe this training has a great influence on the future academic life of students. Lots of them just do the research they are told to do; they apply concepts to data but do not really think about what this research could be because they do not establish links between knowledges.

*What do you think could be done in high school to remedy this situation and allow better creativity and more independent thinking?*

I think the most important would be a reform of examinations. The present college entrance examination in China is really hard for teenagers. The competition is fierce; sometimes, just a one point higher score could help you get into a good college. You have to work very hard and spend almost all your time on examination training aiming at improving your examination skill. Then you do not have time to think. And it is not helping students to establish a knowledge frame since they are forgetting what they studied in high school. They only remember pieces of ‘knowledge’.

*This criticism of Chinese education has been strongly advocated by Huang Quanyu (2014) professor at Miami University. For him, students in China have solid educational foundation, but the system’s emphasis on test taking at the younger levers and do not allow curiosity and critical thinking to blossom up. Susann Bregnbæk (2011) mentions the dilemma faced by parents and professors she interviewed in such context: “Parents face a double bind since doing well at school and being able to pass tests require the kind of extensive cramming that is perceived as inadequate in itself and possibly even harmful. The teachers whom I interviewed similarly face a double bind since devoting more time to critical thinking, student interaction and experiments may end up jeopardising their students’ futures, since it means taking time away from teaching students the kinds of skills that are necessary in order to pass examinations and get to the next level within the educational system”.*

*What you describe actually reminds me of what has been identified in neoliberal management. Such management identifies “goals” to reach that are quantitatively evaluated. It is applied to more and more professional sectors nowadays: Amazon workers’ daily goals are well known, as are those of their delivery persons. In academia the equivalent would be for instance a certain amount of publications. The perverse effect of such systems is that workers, but also people in training for such management system, focus mainly on “goals/indicators” and put quality aside. In the health sector such management can do real damage. Adapted to the education system, it is training to work more on how to give an “expected answer” and to comply to standards in order to reach the predetermined “goal”. The system encourages you to spend time and energy on reaching the benchmarks that have been chosen, succeeding in a specific quantitative examination, and not on actually learning to think by yourself. I read that final exams in certain highly selective colleges in France – Grandes Ecoles – have been criticized because of similar flaws that led to acute standardisation of thought, lack of creativity and originality. Students study pragmatically, with the sole aim of succeeding in their entrance and final exams.*

Sure, students have to be very pragmatic to focus on examination. No one could take the risk of losing the ‘entrance ticket’ for college. What is more, high school examinations usually ask questions and provide just one standard correct answer, such as a correct definition. Repeating these examinations also gradually undermined our creativity. It is really a problem of basic education. I would not say teenagers benefit nothing in high school, because lots of them become very outstanding. What I believe is that our education system could make more efforts on shaping the knowledge frame and encouraging an

independent way of thinking. Less examination, more reading, more reflection, more discussion. And schools could also give students opportunities to get acquainted with different disciplines, rather than just making them take courses in Chinese language, Literature, Math, Physics and Chemistry, etc. Then before graduating high school they would have a basic idea of what anthropology, philosophy, psychology are. It would help students choose their major in college. As for my generation, most of us chose our major in college without a clear idea of what it was. It is a problem in China because for a long time, it was almost impossible to change your major once in college. Once you were in, you had to get enough points for your degree. Take myself as an example; I got my Bachelor's degree in Economy and Management. I was a good student with good scores and scholarship every year, but I did not like it. At that time, what I found myself really interested in was the diversity of culture instead of economic trends. I spent lots of time in the library reading various kinds of books. These readings helped me a lot when I started to learn anthropology. However, even today, I am always thinking that if I had realized that anthropology is my favourite discipline in high school and had been given systematic training in social science in college, things would be different. So, I think that for high school we need this kind of improvement. Of course, it is really hard.

*Yes. This standard way to evaluate through closed questions is coming to France as well. Not really in high school, I think, because our classes are far less crowded than yours. But more and more, BA (Licence) students are evaluated through multiple choice exams with no writing, just ticking boxes. It is cheaper for the university, which has the injunction to be financially independent and to become just another competitive company in the market by minimizing spending to increase earnings. A machine processes the tests. For me it is a question of political choice regarding education. Multiple choice exams are adapted to the choice of decreasing investment in education. It also devaluates the university vis-à-vis private schools, which are mostly accessible to the economically dominant class. The solution would be policies that consider education as a crucial sector for the future of the society, to train people from all walks of life who could find novel solutions to difficult problems, train them to think out of the box, push back the frontiers of knowledge and abilities. But that would require recruiting more university teachers, real human beings who are able to give customized feedback and to engage in discussion with students. Multiple choice exams are adapted to a society of standardized minds.*

In China, this current situation in high school influences the context of study in College. In College, the most important pedagogical tool should be the communication between teachers and students. Teachers should encourage students to think actively and to express their ideas openly. For example, teachers won't just present the definition of a concept proposed by Max Weber, but also explain why and how he reached his views and organizing some discussion during teaching. By doing this, students may establish their academic thinking in various ways. But, in most situations, lots of university teachers just tell students "This are Weber's ideas, this is Durkheim's definition", without explaining what the contribution of their theories is to other scholars or what these ideas might contribute to the study on the contemporary world. Students need to establish links between theories in a proper way, but they do not get enough training in it. Actually, understanding the links between concepts is more essential than just remembering the definition of each concept. For example, when students read Pierre Bourdieu in my class, they find themselves lost in his work if they do not learn how he produced his ideas.

I also feel students need to learn about other researchers' ideas and research processes in order to learn how to collect data, connect the information and identify processes that could be expressed through original ideas, not simply to force exogenous concepts and analysis upon their data. When knowledge is disconnected from the social context, there is a lack of epistemology and reflexivity. I remember one French student, Boris Svartzman, who studied in the Fudan Sociology Department, being surprised when he came to realize this disconnection in his MA classes. In an entire course on the Chicago School, neither the professors nor the students would suggest reflecting upon its relevance to the ongoing urban restructuring/demolition outside the campus door in Shanghai.

This is the key problem in the academic system in China. Most scholars carry out their research in the universities or academic institutes. I obtained a researcher position in a university, which means I have to accomplish “researching work” and teaching obligations each year. We used to be able to link the two obligations: accumulating theories and field data for teaching and developing our thoughts from discussions with students during teaching. But now there is a kind of preeminence of “academic task” (funded projects, required task from the state, etc.). We do not have time anymore to establish links between teaching and researching. Most of the professors just teach with a textbook. Students just receive “ideas” and cannot really establish their own way of thinking.

*It is not embedded in a research, with a research question, debates, hypothesis on collected data. The whole process of research is missing in the teaching.*

*The problem you mention also occurs in France and in other neoliberalised universities in general. One of the main causes seems to be precarious employment of teachers. In France it is said that about 30% of university teachers (mainly at the Bachelor/Licence level – precisely where the best pedagogy practices are needed) live in great precariousness, and not only financially. They are under pressure because they are usually in the midst of preparing their PhDs or searching for postdocs or a permanent position. This instability is exacerbated by the demand to simultaneously carry out many tasks (administration, publishing, etc.). This context makes it difficult for them to prepare well-designed classes and to refine their pedagogy over the years. Second, on a more structural level, French public policies (like the Multi-Annual Research Programming Act) concentrate research funds on few elite sites, fostering inequality between elite universities (with research) and mass universities (where teaching is separated from research)<sup>7</sup>. An anonymous “homeless adjunct” blogged a quite insightful analysis a few years ago about the five easy steps needed to kill the university. After “defund public higher education”, “deprofessionalize and impoverish the professors”, “move in a managerial/administrative class who take over governance of the university” and “incorporate culture and corporate money”, he identified the last step as “Destroy the Students”. He mentions precisely what you observed: “you dumb down and destroy the quality of the education so that no one on campus is really learning to think, to question, to reason. Instead, they are learning to obey, to withstand “tests” and “exams”, to follow rules, to endure absurdity and abuse. Our students have been denied full-time available faculty, the ability to develop mentors and advisors, and faculty-designed syllabi which change each semester”<sup>8</sup>.*

*Another cause in France might be the fact that teaching is clearly devaluated vis-à-vis research, both in term of recruitment and evaluation of the quality of the pedagogy. Compared with Anglophone countries, I feel a lack of reflection on pedagogy and training for teaching at the postgraduate level. Training for teaching at this level is not being provided. It is like, “you are a researcher; therefore, you have the inner ability to teach what you know and what you do.” One possible solution to this issue in France and China would be to re-evaluate the quality of teaching, and in particular to avoid evaluation on the basis only of academic results, which tends to rely solely on quantitative indicators. Professor Feng Dacheng (2015) pointed out how non-quantifiable work, that is, precisely the most valuable and important part of teaching, generally fails to be considered in the Chinese Academic System. According to him, the assessment of a teacher’s work – and of her students’ improvement – is extremely difficult to express numerically. This is true but reducing the use of quantitative indicators would be a first step in the good direction. Today’s teachers, forced to focus on goals for their own evaluation, recruitment and advancement, tend to drown in the calculation of how much funds they have collected, how many projects they have secured, and of course, how many articles they published lest they perish!*

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<sup>7</sup> See Zimmer; Lemercier; Cénac-Guesdon 2020

<sup>8</sup> <https://junctrebellion.wordpress.com/2012/08/12/how-the-american-university-was-killed-in-five-easy-steps/>



## Part 2. Publishing academic papers in China: from Master to professorship

Ah, we have that publishing pressure in China, too. It begins even before recruitment to academia! In China, after graduating from high school you obtain a BA degree (4 years) and then a MA degree (3 years). This is the training for most social science students. You are required to publish at least one paper for your MA. Without the publication, you cannot get your degree. But it is not as strict as the publishing requirement for a PhD and a professorship. For the MA, publishing in any officially recognized journal qualifies.

*In that case is the paper still evaluated by the Journal?*

The MA committee does not evaluate the paper according to the content of the paper. It is just a box to check: “published two papers”, regardless of the topic and the content.

*I heard you often need to pay to publish a paper in a Chinese Journal. How much does it cost?*

Some students pay 300 RMB for one paper. Around 35 euros. It is not very expensive. This allows students to do some cheating to check that “publishing box” and focus on their own research. But Zhang Yuan and I encourage our students to write real papers. Then, we recommend them to what we call “real formal academic journals” (正式学术期刊, zhengshi xueshu qikan). When we say some journals are “real formal academic” ones, it does not mean that others are fake. All academic journals are ranked from A to D. They are evaluated according to certain standards, including the citation rates (引用率, yin yong ju). There is no requirement for the ranking of the journal in which MA students publish. Many journals ranked D accept paid papers with no evaluation. For C journals MA students cannot publish by themselves; they need our name as the co-author.

*Why?*

Because there are a limited number of pages in each journal. The citation rate for MA students’ papers are much lower than those of professors.

*I see, the journals tend to select papers that will increase their own reputation, to increase their own ranking. I have heard of such twisted – although unsurprising – effects of the academic journal auditing system.*

Everyone in Chinese academia has the pressure to publish, even professors. It is really competitive. Few “real formal academic journal” would accept an MA student’s paper, even if it is really good. Students are required to put the supervisor name as the second author. Sometimes the supervisor would even be the first author, so that the supervisor can check his or her own “publishing box”. But in that case, students can check their publishing box, too, to receive their diploma. I always put our students as first author, as a sign of respect for their work.

*Do professors participate in the writing process or does the student write on their own?*

If they pay for the publishing, we let them go ahead alone. But if we recommend the paper, we give them advice, and sometimes we co-write some parts because it is also a form of training in academic writing. In both cases, we do lots of editing to make sure the students’ ideas are clear enough. In addition, before the writing begins, we will usually organize a reading seminar. We decide on a book for review according to the students’ interest. We read the book and related publications together. Students present their perspectives and identify a proper ‘angle’ for their papers. After they finish their drafts, we have more discussion and edit them. So, the main ideas and structure of the paper are the students. This

way students do not panic when finishing their degree paper. In last years, we have found that this training really makes a difference!

*Yes, it must be time consuming, but it is the best way to teach them how to think and write by themselves! I also dedicate a tremendous time to train my students to write in an academic manner. The result is there, and the students are quite grateful for it. While it is stimulating for me as well, it is however clearly slowing down my own research's schedule.*

It is time consuming and counts nothing in our own evaluation. We got no points on this training effort. So, some supervisors just believe reading and editing students' paper is wasting their time. And you could often hear complaints from master students that they email their supervisors their paper but receive no feedback.

When you get to the PhD level, in order to get the PhD degree, you need to publish two papers in journals with a ranking of C or higher. The requirement can also be higher depending on the university. It is hard for a journal to obtain the C rank. If you are published in a C journal your paper is considered good. When teachers want a professorship, only papers published in A, B and C-level journals are considered.

*What do you think about this ranking? Should journals be ranked? Are all papers published in high ranking journals really good? What is the evaluation process?*

Some journals are good. In rank A, most papers are good. But still, some of the papers are published through *guanxi relationship*. You have good *guanxi* with the editor, so you can publish a paper in a short time. Through the *guanxi* system, a researcher can 'bribe'<sup>9</sup> his way to publishing a mediocre paper in a very highly ranked journal. As for us, we do not rely on this kind of relationship. We do not want to seek relationships by 'bribing'. I prefer my relationships with editors to be academic. As for PhD students, they experience great pressure since they need to publish two papers in journal ranked C at least in 3-4 years. This places them in competition with professors who also have pressure to publish.

*Are the papers taken from their PhD thesis, as is the case in academic systems such as in the US?*

It can be extracted from the PhD thesis, but it is complicated because of the timeline of the PhD program. We usually have three or four years to do the PhD. It is a very short time. So, you write the paper first, and propose it to some journals, then it is on the waiting list. It can take several months or even longer before the paper is accepted. Some authors take the time to do some relationship building to get it published. Some journals establish good anonymous review systems and will send the author the remarks for improving the draft. And some journals even organize seminars for publication, inviting several scholars who are writing papers on a similar topic to discuss their papers together. So, it takes time.

*I see, they write early because otherwise it would be too hard to get published in time to get the degree. But the first year they do not have research data. What is the topic of the paper then?*

Yes, exactly. That is the problem. For some students, it is impossible to publish before graduating. Some PhD students just give money. There is a kind of industry, an academic industry in China. There are agencies that can help you get a space in an academic Journal. They can even charge you like 10 thousand euros.

*RMB you mean?*

No, no, euros.

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<sup>9</sup> Gift exchange and rendered services are the basis of *guanxi* relationship.

*That is expensive!*

Yes! I did not know it could be so expensive, until some years ago a colleague from another university paid such a large amount of money to an agency for a B ranked journal. If you are trying to get a professorship or career advancement, publishing in a very high ranked journal helps a lot. But truth be told if your paper is really bad you are paying for nothing.

*I have heard of the cash-per-publication reward policy developed in some universities in China since the late 1990s. In regard to what you are saying, it looks like a well-oiled system in which researchers pay to have a paper published for career evaluation but can later be rewarded with cash by their university, which itself needs to have a high level of publication for its own evaluation. It is like a return on investment both for the researcher and the university. It is a pity because none of this energy is adapted to researchers' pace and needs; it only meets the requirement to check the appropriate boxes of the institution's own evaluation system according to policy standards. It feels like an unproductive system. To some extent we also have such a twisted system growing in France. For instance, if researchers want to publish a book, they need to pay a significant amount – several thousands of euros – to scientific publishers. They need to search for funding through institutions, which provide funds according to their record, which in turn is evaluated through standard quantitative indicators. It is a vicious circle of exclusion, a system tending to favour those who are already most favoured. In order to publish the results of your research, you need to embrace bureaucratic indicators and standards, or you must have financial capital to spare. The Multi-Annual Research Programming Act will exacerbate this two-speed system by increasing salaries through bonuses paid at the discretion of the administrative hierarchy (such as university presidents). These bonuses will be given according to records in publishing, securing a national or international project, and so on. In short, finding extra money becomes the only way for a researcher to collect basic data and to publish when the whole incentive system switches from “going beyond the frontiers of knowledge”<sup>10</sup> to “going beyond the frontiers of your own wallet”. Money becomes fundamental and intrinsic to the researcher's life world; it is no longer the sole concern of academic institutions and bureaucrats. Researchers are more and more encouraged to become good entrepreneurs; to find money becomes the best way to, in fact, accumulate more capital – monetary capital, but also social and reputational capital. I really do think that this system is ill-suited to attract the best applicants for the future of science and academia. Even though many of us are severely critical toward the “pay to publish” institution, and some colleagues even refuse individual bonuses,<sup>11</sup> it appears to be a widely legalized system in today's international academic world.*

In China, cash-per-publication reward policies differ from university to university. Some universities are ‘generous’ since they need more publications to increase their ranking or to get more funding from the State. It seems quite positive since it does encourage Chinese scholars to work hard and publish more papers. However, as you mentioned, the social sciences cannot be evaluated according to quantitative evaluation standards. What is more, capital is two-faced; it encourages some researchers, but destroys many more. It is quite similar in China: Some scholars sound like businessmen calculating the contents of their wallet when writing and choosing their activities. Some refuse the invitation of journals with good reputations because they are ranked low and would not allow them to get enough publication bonuses. It also encourages scholars to continue the ‘bribe’ practices as well as these agencies facilitating publication.

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<sup>10</sup> The official motto of the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS).

<sup>11</sup> For instance, in 2016 Samuel Alizon, a researcher at the CNRS, refused the individual bonus he received on the ground that bonus incentives exacerbate the precariousness and privatization of research in France. Since 2010 the CNRS awards successful applicants to the European Research Council (ERC) with a fifty-thousand-euro bonus over five years. See [https://www.lemonde.fr/sciences/article/2016/06/20/recherche-certains-primas-son-elles-des-credits-detournes\\_4954432\\_1650684.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/sciences/article/2016/06/20/recherche-certains-primas-son-elles-des-credits-detournes_4954432_1650684.html)

*What about these agencies, are they legal?*

No, it is a 'grey industry' that operates secretly. The agencies do not promise that you will be published; they just promise to persuade editors through their own *guanxi*, and you pay to access their *guanxi*. This is what happened to that colleague of mine. It helped him secure the publication of his paper. Even good papers need *guanxi* to be published in certain journals because of the competition. But PhD students are usually charged seven hundred to one thousand euros for a C-level journal.

*Do you mean the money is not used for actual journals and book production expenses such as book payments are made in France to publishing houses? That the editors of the ranked journal accepting the money are corrupt? They could earn side money because of their position.*

Yes. Some become really rich. As an example, I know someone from College who became an editor after obtaining his BA degree. By the time I got my PhD, so in five years, he had two apartments and a car, which is impossible with a basic editor income.

*What is the process to become editor of an academic journal in China? Do editors also do research and teaching? What is their position? Are they usually associate professors at a university?*

A professional editor should first get the certification of editorship and attend editorial training courses regularly. They are from different discipline and are editing papers from their own major. Most of them also teach at universities or institutes. Some journals are managed by a university, so most editors are also teaching and supervising graduate students. Editors usually get an MA or PhD degree after their editorship certification. Some get the editorial position because of their achievement in their major. Some journals invite good scholars to be guest editors of an issue, or to be "editor-in-charge" (主编 *zhubian*). Since editors are also evaluated according to their academic achievements, they are required to publish academic papers in academic journals. Obviously, it is easy for them because they are in the editor system; they have the *guanxi* needed to publish. So, they do not have to work as much on their papers, or on relationship building as people trained as researchers. I am not saying all editors are the same: some editors are really professional and really do serious academic research. I am presenting the possible problem this system leads to.

In China, the consequences of this publication system are dire for PhD students, but also for professors like us, who do not want to participate in the 'bribe system'. We have lower chances of getting published because there is little space left in the journals once the papers accepted through *guanxi* are included. There is a strong competition among the papers that avoid the bribe system. There are lots of applicants to publish! However, I still believe what we should first do to change the situation is to take the time to write really good papers, otherwise we are just complaining instead of making a positive change in the system. I am happy to find some journals are willing to publish good papers written by PhD students.

*Yes, that means the system is thankfully not entirely locked. I would add that, another positive action that we researchers could take could be to simply boycott editing houses and journals that fall short of basic principles of academic deontology. Refuse to read and write for their publications. I am personally more and more concerned about my choices in that regard. In a capitalist world, consumers (who pay for a product) have more power than producers of value (in this context, us researchers). Here we are both consumers and producers!*

*However, it would be also helpful if institutions could lower the pressure on publishing. Everyone, from PhDs to professors, are mainly evaluated and recruited regarding the number of publications!*

Not only them. Even the administrative staff in universities. They are also required to publish papers in academic journals, because most of them want to have both “administrative” and “professor” status. For instance, if you are the director of a big university center, you usually let the secretary do the administrative work for you while you work on your research. But usually your secretary is also a teacher which means she or he is required to publish papers to get promotion. In many universities and institutions, administrative staff members are from the faculty.

*Do you mean that universities hire administrative staff among PhDs or MAs who fail to secure an academic position? In that case they already would know the academic system, and it is a way for them to get an inside position allowing them to move up to teaching and researching at a later time?*

In many universities, there are two main categories of staff: teaching and administrative. The latter are called ‘teaching assistants’ (教学辅导, *jiaoxue fudao*). It is so competitive for PhD students nowadays that some institutions will only recruit teaching assistants with PhDs or above. There is less pressure for them in the annual evaluation, but most of them are seeking to transfer to teaching positions. Therefore, they also have to work hard on publication. So, administrative work does not help them advance their academic careers. As for professors who also are the director of a centre or department, the administrative position could bring them more advantages for publication. It establishes them good *guanxi*.

*Do you think that the quality of the research published in Chinese academic journals is affected by this system?*

Yes, quite a lot. Just like journals in France and many other countries, journals in China also prefer to establish their ‘character’ or ‘style’ in many ways in order to survive and stay competitive. The editor may decide which line to follow and the topic for each volume. It definitely influences the academic work being done. In addition, to accumulate influence in the academic world, journals welcome papers with big names. With such fierce competition, publication is difficult for young scholars, who may actually write better papers than some senior scholars. They may wait for years for a ‘good’ publication, especially when they focus on some classic but not popular field. When I say ‘good’, it is because publication itself is not that hard. In China, it is not very hard to initiate a journal. Scholars can come together, apply for a book number, and launch it. But it is difficult to reach a rank of C and above. Since all academic evaluation requires at least a C-level publication, it is not easy for journals lower than C to get good papers. The evaluation of a journal is very complicated. One of them is the journal’s “influence”, the Clout Index. It is calculated by a complicated formulation, including the rate of citation of papers published in the journal in a year. But the problem is, some papers are focusing on some fundamental topics, and most of them are quite difficult to follow up. These papers may take years for citations to accrue. Journals anxious to get high index every year therefore have to refuse papers with low potential for citation. The evaluation of journals is supposed to be an incentive for them, but when it becomes too frequent (e.g., annual), it may push journals into ‘a fast academic industry’. As a result, scholars abandon long-term projects that are not favored by high-ranking journals. For some A- and B-ranked journals, it is much easier to remain influential. They can maintain some space for ‘difficult papers’, while other journals prefer not taking the risk. The most popular suggestions or advices for young researchers are: if you want to publish a paper on a journal, first study what kind of topic it likes. It sounds nothing wrong, but it could destroy the independency of a young research.

*Discussing the organizational structure of academic presses, David Graeber (2014: 84) considers that “even if anything like the works of Boas, Malinowski, or Evans-Pritchard were written today, it would never find a publisher – except, perhaps, outside the academy”. He is not the only one to make such statement. You are pointing out one of the crucial problems that academics face in countries where publication has become the norm for managerial evaluation. It has been said to have biased,*

*unproductive, and detrimental effects*<sup>12</sup>. We often quote this story about a paleontologist who discovered several dinosaur teeth and decided to publish one paper on each tooth to adjust to his university requirement even though it had no scientific rationale. There are other, much worse effects of this system, such as scientific misconduct, that are increasing with the spread of neoliberal management in academia. There has been deep analysis of this process. The quantitative auditing system has been shown to lead to ethically questionable behavior, an “economics of cheating” that is giving science in general a very bad image. Retraction Watch is an organization that lists the dysfunctions of the world of scientific publishing, showing that about 1500 articles are retracted every year, two thirds of them for misconduct<sup>13</sup>. The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment – DORA, which was initiated in 2013 – developed a set of recommendations. But research managerial tendencies do not seem to be backing down. Worse yet, in France the Multi-Annual Research Programming Act takes it as a model to follow! Julien Gossa calls it a ‘programmatic law for structural scientific misbehavior’: “in a context of high competition, researchers may objectively and mechanically benefit from exaggerating the scope of their work, from taking shortcuts, rushing to put their data online without verifying them, and even embellishing them”<sup>14</sup>. The system you are depicting is quite frightening for us in France since this new law aims at focusing even more on such evaluation logic based on bibliometrics. The French government seems to see China as a source of inspiration; they look at Chinese publication statistics and conclude that French scientists are lagging behind. Chinese numbers are through the roof, and are increasing by the day<sup>15</sup>. But when we consider that the Chinese system partially leads to non-evaluated papers being published or to publishing in return for payment, these numbers can be relativized. The number of publications in China might also be high because the evaluation system is cheap. Like the multiple choice test we were talking about before. It is chosen not because it is actually a good way to identify quality but because evaluation is a time-consuming activity and the number of people to evaluate is so high, especially in China. Government decided to use so-called “objective indicators” since the decision was made that researchers could not be trusted and had to be evaluated through an “external” and “quantitative” management system. Academic publishing in China is huge not necessarily because publications are associated with specific research projects but because they are an unnegotiable requirement from MAs to professors. What is especially excruciating for researchers from France to China is that the Journal Impact Factor has been proved by now to be a non-pertinent way to evaluate individual activity and progress. François Métivier (2020) pointed at on several occasions that each country’s share in the world’s scientific production is correlated to its own share in the world’s investment in scientific research: “production and citations are merely, first and foremost, the reflection of the financial investment a country makes in its research.”

Exactly. In China, we have the same saying about our famous senior scholars: that none of them would have survived in today’s evaluation system because their papers would not reach a high enough number of citations. It is truly hard to be ‘objective’ in evaluation. The real problem is not finding an objective method, but rethinking ‘evaluation’ itself. Do we need evaluation in the academic world? Some will say yes because they think scholars would stop researching and writing without such pressure. But academic research is creative work. Pressure could consist in academic reputation instead of so-called objective standards. You will not be ‘lazy’ if no one respects you as a scholar. You love your research, and you will not give it up. Some regard the evaluation system as an objective standard for calculating salaries.

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<sup>12</sup> See Insel 2009, Longo 2009, Berry 2009, Audier 2009, not to mention the scandal with the Lancet Journal about the paper on the covid-19 possible drug, which reveal again the flaws of such scientific edition system.

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.lemonde.fr/sciences/article/2020/06/15/covid-19-le-lancetgate-revele-des-failles-de-l-edition-scientifique\\_6042946\\_1650684.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/sciences/article/2020/06/15/covid-19-le-lancetgate-revele-des-failles-de-l-edition-scientifique_6042946_1650684.html)

<sup>14</sup> <http://blog.educpros.fr/julien-gossa/2020/01/18/lppr-une-loi-de-programmation-de-linconduite-scientifique/>

<sup>15</sup> China became the second-largest producer of scientific publication in the world (17%) - behind the US - and it is still growing. In comparison, France is in the seventh place (Mynard 2017).

They praise the cash-per-publication reward policy according to a logic of capital. The ‘generosity’ of universities or research institutes did in fact create a boom of publications and increased citation rates, but do these papers contribute to their field? If all we do is publish papers to increase publication numbers, we do not have time left to think about the future of the discipline. Who will have a prosperous future if the discipline itself declines?

*Yes, and this could be said of the humanities and social sciences in general. In the end, it impacts the credibility of scientific and academic research.*

*You appear to be criticizing a system that forces PhD and MA students to publish in ranked journals as a requirement of receiving a degree. What would you suggest as a better system to evaluate the writings of MA and PhD students?*

I will not deny that some publication pressure can be a healthy stimulation for graduate students. I also encourage students to write short essays, for example book reviews, an introduction to some theory, fieldwork reports, etc. By doing this, students learn how to write academic papers and accumulate material for their degree paper. A degree only takes 3 or 4 years, so it is better for students to concentrate on writing something related to their degree paper. Instead of formal publication, why not organize anonymous reviews of the students’ paper in the second year? Then students could get some feedback from scholars other than their supervisors. When they know they can get serious feedback on their paper, they get motivated to read, think and write. And the process helps their further fieldwork and degree paper. In a word, considering the competition in contemporary publication system, anonymous reviews might be a better evaluation for graduate students before they are qualified to have their defense. Some universities have already carried out reforms in this way and removed the requirement for students to publish in journals. For most universities, about 3-5 months before the paper defense, most degree paper are reviewed anonymously by 3 scholars from other universities or institutions. The reviewers will give their remarks and their decision if the paper is outstanding, or is qualified for paper defense, or is supposed to do more editing before paper defense or is not qualified. If two reviewers believe this paper is not qualified, then the student has to delay his/her paper defense to November or next June. It helps students as well as their supervisors, but if students got review on their writing in their second year, they could be better prepared for degree paper.

### **Part 3. Calculating your income: The academic point system**

*Let us move on to the topic of income and its association to the evaluation. In France all civil servants, researchers, and teachers have a nationally fixed salary, which increases through seniority. This national system for academia was in place in China too, before the 1990s. The income is not associated to your evaluation, except few bonus you can apply to or when you secure a European project for instance, also when you pass the highly competitive evaluation required from Associate Professorship (*chargé de recherche/Maître de conférence*) to Professorship (*Directeur de recherche*). This evaluation depends on several factors but mainly the decision is taken by a committee of academic peers from your own discipline. There are no common official indicators. In anthropology, from what I saw, from recruiting to career advancement, the evaluation is mainly qualitative. The Multi-Annual Research Programming Act threatens to change the system introducing more bonus and new status disconnected from the civil servant system, and possibly connecting evaluation to salaries. What about in China now?*

The academic achievement and salaries of Chinese scholars are evaluated in terms of ‘academic points’ (科研分, *keyan fen*). The calculation of points and the point requirement depends on the university or institution you belong to. In my university, for instance, I am now a professor at Grade 4, so I am supposed to reach about 600 points in 3 years, 200 points per year. For an associate professor at Grade 6, it is about 540 points. The grade is kind of further ranking scholars based on their position. Grade 1 to 4 are for professors; Grade 5 to 7 are for associate professors. Scholars of higher grade are

required to score more points and get higher salary. Publishing a paper in a C-level journal gives you 45 points. But you also get points if you secure a national or provincial project. A national project can give you more than 200 points depending on how many members are in the project and if you are the leader or not. Another way of getting points is to write policy proposals to the government, and if your proposal receives an official endorsement from a high government officer, then you get points. For example, if it is from the provincial governor, you may get 100 points (I do not remember the criteria for it). Some scholars are fancy with writing proposal since it is short (usually 1500 to 3000 characters). While many scholars believe the reply of a high government officer should not be counted with 'academic points', or at least not that many. It is always a good thing to share your academic work to the governance and social management, but I take it as an obligation which never fits the cash-per-proposal logic. What's important to note is that if you fail to get enough points, your salary will be reduced, and it will have an impact on your promotion.

*If you get a national project, can you keep points for the following year?*

In my university, before 2011, you could not defer using your points until the following year. Since 2012, with the reform on the points system, you could. I did not mention that when you get more points than required, you can get bonuses for the extra points, 8-9 Euros per point. Since 2012, the evaluation is for 3 years. If you get a national project on your first year, and you are afraid you won't reach 200 points the following year, then you can defer some points until the next year, thus giving up the bonus of these points. 3-year evaluations are more reasonable since it takes months or years to do research, writing and publishing. I now feel particularly safe because I just got a national project, which will allow me to concentrate on fieldwork, research and teaching, so I have no pressure to publish for the next 2 years. In 2 years, when I have gathered all my data, it is time for writing and publication. Most universities and research institutions in China now use 3-year or 4-year evaluations, but some do not.

*What other activities and productions give you points?*

Books! But it depends on the publishing house. Publishers also are categorized into ranks: A, B, C, D... If your book is published by a publishing house ranked A, then you get at least 240 points. 100 if it is B. For C you sometimes get nothing. I do not remember the exact numbers. Only A- and B-level publishing houses allow you to get points. So, publishing houses in C and below have more pressure, it is hard for them to get good book proposals.

*I remember you received some awards for publishing. Did they also give you points? How does the award system for scholars work in China?*

There are provincial and national awards for publishing. You can apply to them with one of your latest articles or books. There are several categories, such as the "outstanding field report of the year". Each category has first, second, third prize. You get different points according to the level and kind of the award and depending on whether it is a national or provincial competition. As the first author of an outstanding report, I got about 80 points that year. Usually you only get points for awards recognized by government offices. You also have awards provided by scholars. But such awards do not give you any points to secure your salary. It is only for your reputation. In this scholar award system, I was listed as one of the most influential scholars in China for my discipline in both 2017 and 2019, but this did not give me any points. It is good for your reputation and it is uplifting. You feel happy! And people feel happy for you! You can be proud, but you do not get any points. It gives you no advantage if you want to apply for professorship.

*Do researchers serve on the award committees?*

They do for awards issued by the government. They help review and evaluate your work.



*Do you get points for teaching, too?*

Yes, but in the category of ‘teaching hours.’ Teaching is not calculated in the 600 points for 3 years. It is calculated separately and according to how many hours you teach, how many students you supervise, etc. The amount of points also depends on the course level. An MA course is 51 points, 1.5 hour per week, 17 weeks per term. At the undergraduate level, two courses can give you at least 80 points, depending on the size of the class. The standard class is 40 students. If there are more students in your class, you get more points. For instance, last semester I taught two big classes of 50 students each and I got over 120 points.

The point goal for teaching depends on your position. There are three faculty positions at our university now: researcher, teacher, and teacher-researcher. I used to be a researcher and now I am a teacher-researcher. For researcher positions, there is a lot of publishing pressure but less so for teaching. Teaching one MA course and one PhD course per year is enough. For teachers, there is a great pressure on teaching, but less on research. Teachers are also required to publish on teaching skills and pedagogy. For those who hold teacher-researcher positions, there is less pressure on research than in researcher positions and less pressure on teaching than in teacher positions. Teacher-researcher is a new position set up in 2015. It allows for more flexibility in teaching and researching arrangements. I became a teacher-researcher in 2018 just before I finally got my Professor Position. Since then, I do not need to rush to publish every year. I can think about writing papers more deliberately. In the past, I did publish some papers which would have been much better if I could have worked on them a little bit more. I published them because I needed the points. It is quite frustrating. These papers built my reputation, but if I had spent more time on them, they could have been better. So, it seems I managed to survive quite well in this evaluation system; nevertheless, I regret those publications I did in a hurry. I believe I could do much better if I was not stressed out by this points system.

*What do scholars think about this system? Is it a good way to determine salaries according to teaching or research productivity?*

Evaluation is never objective. The points appear to be an equitable yardstick. Points can translate unmeasurable academic activities into numbers, but it cannot measure their achievements. The point system fails to encourage scholars to improve their teaching since the points you get for a course are decided according to whether it is a required course (必修课, *bixiuke*) or an optional course (选修课, *xuanxiuke*), or if it is part of a popular major with more students. The bigger the audience, the higher the points. Students will send feedback on each course at the end of the term, but it does not affect how many points you get. If student feedback are bad and not enough students register for your optional course, the course may be canceled, and you do not get any points. But for required courses, usually, student feedback does not influence the points the teacher scores.

*Does this situation heighten competition between university teachers to get popular courses instead of classes that are less advantageous for their income? Does it spark conflicts and create sour relationships between scholars in a way that is detrimental to collaboration between scholars?*

Yes, it does. For each major in university, there will be a standard training plan (培养方案, *peiyang fang'an*) approved by the State Ministry of Education. It lists all the points students get for each course and what courses they are supposed to take each year. As I said, as a professor, required courses bring you more points than optional courses. New teachers usually cannot get required courses since they are all already taken by seniors; they can only set up an optional course.

Teachers usually prepare their course in a flexible way. You can choose a textbook for teaching, or you can establish your own syllabus for the course. The points system will not take this into consideration. It does not encourage teachers to improve their syllabus or teaching methods. Of course, good teachers

will strive to improve on their own accord. If you are not too bad at teaching, students' feedback won't affect your ability to keep teaching a particular class. So, if a mediocre but senior teacher still wants to teach a course, it means young teachers have no chance to take the course. Department directors will of course try to balance teachers, but this balancing effort may never take the teaching itself into consideration. On the other hand, you can design your course whichever way you want. It is quite possible for students to learn lots of quantitative research methods in a course called 'Fundamental Theories on Social Science'. We are under a reform on the courses: teachers will now apply for a course and present their teaching plans, then all teachers of this major decide who should take the course.

*This sounds like an improvement.*

*Can you explain a little bit more the income system for academia in China? You said that scholars who fail to reach the goal see their income decrease while others accumulate more points than the official goal and then receive extra money. How much can your income decrease if you do not reach the goal?*

It depends. Our salary is broken up in three parts, but the calculation is not nationally regulated, so the amounts of these parts really vary depending on each university. First there the basic salary, a fixed amount according to your position. It is about 1/4 of the salary, not that much. The second part is called *jingjie* (津贴), you could call it a bonus. If you are in a "full researcher" position, the bonus can be higher than the "full teacher" position depending on your university. As an associate researcher I used to get about 3000 RMB each month for this bonus part. Now it is less, about 2000 RMB since I am in a teacher-researcher position. The third part consists of welfare and other benefits, including health insurance, housing etc. Since we do not have an apartment on campus, we get several hundred RMB to cover the rent. Actually, it may cost 3000 RMB a month to rent a 3-bedroom apartment for a family of four like ours in a good (not nice) region in Chengdu. But it is better than nothing!

*At the CNRS I currently get an extra 90 euros a month on account of living in the Paris area, where pressure on real estate makes rents much higher than elsewhere in the country.*

With 90 euros in Paris you get nothing! *(Both laughing)*

The welfare part of the salary includes 300 RMB for food and other things like that. This part is also fixed each month. If you are short on points you only lose all or part of your bonus for the entire following year. With this pressure to attain the required points or possibly losing their bonus, some associate professors prefer not to apply for professorship despite being qualified. They believe it will require too much effort to get enough points. The fixed basic salary is very low, one or two thousand RMB, not enough to pay the rent in a provincial capital, so losing the bonus can bring you in financial trouble.

An important part of the welfare salary is called a "teaching bonus" (课时费). In some universities, teachers get extra pay for teaching, while other universities just record that you reached your points goal for teaching. The teaching bonus is calculated on each teaching hour (45 minutes). A professor gets 100 RMB for one teaching hour in a standard undergraduate course and more for PhD courses, it could be about 130 for one teaching hour. At some universities, you only get the "teaching bonus" once you exceed the required points for your position. You can obtain 300 points one year and get no bonus if you were required to reach these 300 points anyway. Only after you have reached the goal do the teaching bonus points start to accumulate. This is how you can reach a high salary. If you teach a lot, you get good income; if you do not teach much you only have a basic income, which in a city like Chengdu means a poor income.

As I said, not every teacher can have many courses, especially those with fewer students in that department. Some of the required courses, such as Marxism and English, are for all students, no matter what major they are in. Teachers in these courses repeat the same content to lots of different classes. It

does not take much time to prepare. But things are different for those who teach specific courses for specific majors. For example, I teach 'Fundamental Theories of Social Science' for undergraduate ethnology majors. There is only one class each year. I introduce them to the three founders of modern social science and put together a reading seminar for each main theory. It is hard work and takes a long time to prepare but I cannot teach another class since no other curriculum includes this course at my university. So, young teachers actually have to try their best to teach popular courses instead of fundamental course, since they could get more points by more enrollment. What is more, teachers who successfully get many teaching opportunities, do not actually have enough time and energy to prepare their teaching. How can one blame them for that? They need to survive in the city. This system actually undermines the passion of teachers to improve their teaching.

*I understand, teachers would prefer to optimize their time and prepare once for several courses. It also discourages teachers from proposing specific topics related to their research. It is not just a question of personal choice; it affects your ability to use the time you have to reach your points goal and secure your salary for the next year.*

*Who decides the amount of point you need to reach? The university?*

It really depends. Universities decide on the rule, but they are supposed to get permission from the central government.

You might think it is a very complicated system. You might wonder why we lay so much emphasis on points? One popular explanation is we have such a big population; with so many scholars, how can you establish a qualitative evaluation which is also objective. Especially when your salary and your position, are all related to your evaluation. I am never really satisfied with this explanation, especially when more countries including France are gradually tending to take an evaluation system which fundamentally follow the direction of our point system. This, for me, is unfortunately the fate of our times which is "characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world'" (Weber 1918-1919). This unpleasant fate was illustrated well by Max Weber one hundred years ago. What is happening in China's academia is not an exceptional but an exemplification of our times. We are always aiming at making things better, but unfortunately, not every good motive lead to good result. Wanting to reach equality and justice itself never presents the certainty of realizing equality and justice. We really need to form a comparative perspective on the evaluation systems from different countries so that we could figure out what is the 'value' of social science, and what is an 'authentic' scholar.

*That is very true. It is a huge task but us scholars of the world should join this reflection and not let techno-bureaucrats with biased, few or no experience of the ground, carrying other goals in mind (like so called cost reduction), decide for us and for the civil society. The future of science progresses and of higher education is at stakes here.*

*Chinese universities seem to have reached the full "independency" and managerial evaluation system that the French government and the European Union as a whole has been dreaming of since the Bologna declaration. For me, what you are depicting feels like a dystopic nightmarish episode of "Black Mirror" about how inefficient and toxic a managerial system can be in academia. I understand that since we are paid, we need to be accountable for our activities, especially as civil servants. But surely there must be ways to do it that are less detrimental and more efficient in improving the quality of our teaching and research. When you first talked to me about this point-based system, it felt as if it fully embodied the capitalist ideology. Each worker is in charge of capitalizing points on an individual basis, teamwork and cooperative spirit being entirely excluded and hence devaluated. But when I read Feng (2015), I realized that this system, which was implemented with enthusiasm as early as the 1990s, was in fact inspired by the "points for work" that were calculated by production brigades during the People's Commune System under Mao's rule! State socialism and capitalism meet common ground when it is about controlling the activities of masses of workers through a bureaucratized and auditing system!*

Yes, there are some connections between the working points used for calculating labour in a planned economy and the academic points system. Besides, the evaluation system in the natural sciences also influenced the evaluation system in the social sciences. The preference for calculable, measurable, objective, and quantitative indicators also encouraged the academic points policy. Scholars are being individualized as publication and teaching machines with different productivity levels calculated according to points. This metaphor, I think, presents an image where no creative work is possible.

#### **Part 4 Recruitment and young scholars: an assessment**

As scholars, we are evaluated each year after our recruitment. This recruitment follows the same guidelines as the evaluation of scholars. In fact, it follows the same pattern as when you are a student. When you do your MA degree, the kind of publishing you secure determines which PhD program you may enroll in. Once you get your PhD, your publishing record determines at which university you can apply for a position.

There are two elements that count in applications for a position in Chinese academia. One is the university you graduated from. In China some universities are ranked as prestige and outstanding ones, and they are listed in two programs (the “958” and the “211” programs). They are considered high-reputation universities, similar to Ivy League institutions. If you graduate from these universities, it is easier to get a position. Some universities refuse to consider applicants whose PhDs are from universities outside of these programs. Zhang Yuan and I were lucky because the university where we obtained our PhDs - Central Minzu University in Beijing – was included in this list. But now some universities are stricter and even look at your BA degree. If you did not get your first degree from a listed university, they refuse your application. Sometimes they will not tell you. But they will not even look at your application.

The second element a university takes into consideration during recruitment is the publication record. If you published in a highly ranked journal during your PhD the odds of your application are higher. Applicants all have a publishing record, because otherwise they would not have an MA or a PhD degree. I heard about a PhD student at Beijing University who published a paper in an A-ranked journal. He is really talented. Even before his graduation, he got a teaching opportunity at another university in Beijing. Now he received several proposals from prestigious universities. So, as I said earlier, even though we are not in very high positions in the education system, and we may not be able to implement reforms, there is still the possibility to do good research, write good papers and publish honestly. We can change the ‘academic ecology’ with our small efforts.

*Indeed, and it is a good point to stay positive and hopeful. Who are the people involved in the hiring processes at universities in China?*

There is a department that manages the hiring itself, but disciplinary departments decide. There will be a committee doing the interview, including listening to your trial lecture (20 minutes teaching to the interviewee and some students to show your teaching skills). Most of them are teachers who are in the major or a related major.

*Secondat (2020) depicts the Chinese academic system as quite monetarily oriented, where everything can be bought, from diplomas to the teacher’s attention to your child, even positions at schools and universities. According to him, in 2019 a civil servant professorship would cost around 80 thousand euros for a monthly salary of 2,000 euros, without bonuses. Have you heard about such practices?*

I feel sad because what Secondat depicts is happening in China. China is a socialist country but is still under the influence of modernity. Here, modernity follows what Anthony Giddens described in his work, especially in *The Consequences of Modernity*. Unfortunately, the ideology of capital is embedded

in modernity. All countries are affected by this process; in every country, everything is calculated with money. In China, we have an old saying: 'You can make the ghosts work for you if you propose a good price' (有钱能使鬼推磨). What makes things different is that in recent decades this calculation has gone hand in hand with efforts to achieve equality according to objective and measurable standards. This results in bribe and corruption in many ways. When it combines with neoliberalism, it seems everything has its price and can be exchanged for money. A degree is supposed to build reputation and knowledge, but when it instead builds your future salary, getting a degree becomes a business, and buying a degree becomes a reasonable and cost-efficient choice. The same holds true of those who buy their professorship. Still, we can see that these 'buy everything' activities are not always successful and are never praised by society; otherwise my husband and I would have had no chance to get our professorships. Most of my colleagues got their position because of their outstanding research. Anyway, we will not disguise the dark side, but it is not reasonable to be critical by denying the bright side.

*For Sangren (2007), in the whole academia, "[...] value is determined less by free competition linked to scientific values than by what sells in monetary terms, where 'productivity' is increasingly objectified and commodified by cost-benefit logic (often advanced by university administrations concerned to raise their rankings or answer to government agendas) and other academic variants of social Darwinism".*

*In France, too, controversies over recruitment through relationships or biased reasons have been ongoing for decades, including rumours of professors abusing their status over applicants (students and subalterns in general), especially female ones. However, thankfully, what I see around me is mainly professional integrity. This does not mean that improper conduct does not exist anymore but that the shame might be changing sides; it is seen as morally reprehensible, so it is becoming more difficult to hide.*

*Back to recruiting in Chinese academia, how does the qualitative and quantitative evaluation process unfold?*

We do have qualitative evaluation since each applicant is supposed to get recommendation from two professors. Usually your degree supervisor is one of the recommenders. But for the university, it is really hard to decide which applicant is outstanding just judging by recommendation letters. You need an 'objective' system to pick out the right one and to persuade you that those who are rejected failed to qualify. We all get used to the points system from the first grade! Even for the PhD application, most universities still organize an entrance exam. After the examination there is an interview. You get points depending on how you fare in the interview. The university sorts all applicants according to their final scores following the exam and interview. If there are two seats, the first two applicants get them. So, to some extent, we really do not know how to do only qualitative evaluation.

*To the difference of yearly evaluation of scholar's activities, which does not require a precise ranking, in context of mass applicants for recruitments, translating the evaluation in comparable numbers might indeed ease up the selection process. But numerical numbers have the tendency to create an illusion of objectivity and accuracy.*

It is also hierarchical. Numbers sometimes are really more reliable and more equal. Sometimes, the leader of the committee might be a very bossy person who might influence other members or even push them to give a higher score to his or her preferred applicant. This has been happening a lot, and we are trying to find a more objective way. The points system appears objective, and it does stimulate research; however, it is like a bird cage.

*And it has many negative effects indeed. This system does not encourage young researchers to think outside the box and follow their research intuition. It is a high risk of standardization, from training to recruiting and practicing.*

Many scholars have qualms about the system, but it has so much power over your career and your salary. You have no choice but to first survive in such a system. Some scholars follow the rules well while managing to do their own research despite them. For example, you can apply for a project that is very practical, but also take advantage of the funding to do fieldwork for a personal project and later form your own theory. Such scholars are actually very serious; they do not just finish their project tasks but also spend much time on the reports. This means that scholars can survive in the system, and some are very outstanding, however, the system itself does not encourage creative research. It establishes a trend of finishing your assignment rationally and cost-efficiently. I have to calculate my academic work and consider, for example, that if I get enough points this year, I will delay the publication of my next paper.

This system can generate a great amount of papers, because everybody has the pressure to publish. We publish so many papers! But it is not creative. You write a paper, not because you have found an interesting and good analysis with data you collected, but because you have to publish something to get your points. You chose a topic, not because you believe it is a good one, but because it is popular with journals, so it increases your chances of getting published and of getting a high citation rate. When I was an associate professor, I needed points every year, so I wrote papers. Ten years after I got my PhD, I published papers that built my reputation in the academic world, but if I had not published them in a rush, they could have had more influence. In other words, I wasted some good topics and data. So, when I got my professor position, I decided to slow down on writing. Some colleagues got tired of writing and just gave it up when they got their professorship.

*You are pointing out some very interesting side effects of this system of publication pressure. From your own experience what would be your assessment on the efficacy of this system in nurturing good research?*

My husband and I got our professorships 3 years ago. Since then, we decided to concentrate on our research and the papers we are interested in. We took the time to read and to do fieldwork. My husband published a really good paper last year. I am also working on a paper I started years ago but haven't published yet, on water-controlling systems and worship of water deities in the locality of Dujiangyan, a world heritage site. Gradually this project is becoming more and more interesting and inspiring to me. I have good materials now to write a good paper on the topic. I feel confidence and joy because I see how the knowledge has accumulated. We both felt we learned more when we slowed down. So you can see this system failed to encourage us as young scholars.

For younger generations, they face even more pressure. My husband and I were lucky enough to benefit from what in China we call 'the iron bowl' (铁饭碗, *tiefanwan*), a metaphor of a tenure position. That means we cannot easily be fired. We are permanent staff (编制, *bianzhi*), like civil servants. We obtained this position as soon as we were recruited as lecturers at our university. Several years ago, a reform was carried out at Beijing University and some universities. Then it arrived at our university last year. The reform applies more pressure on young scholars who are now recruited as new staff without iron bowls, "not listed". Young scholars get a 3-year or 4-year contract with a university. The contract requires a certain amount of publications within the contract years; for example, in Sichuan University, a 3-year contract requires nine papers in C ranked journals. But they also have to secure one national project, one provincial project, and in the meantime they need to teach and do other things.

*Scholars cannot easily have children during that time, considering the tremendous load of domestic work required.*

It is not mentioned in the contract, but yes, you are afraid to have a baby during that time! Even with all your energy and very little sleep, reaching all these goals seem arduous. I heard that someone did

manage in Sichuan University to do all that! She published the nine papers and secured a national project. Well, not a provincial one though. But that was enough, so she did get another contract.

*After doing all that, did she not receive a permanent position?*

No. She got another contract. A longer one but with less pressure to publish, more time for real research. With this contract she can later apply for associate professorship. If you do not reach the goal, then you might get fired. And even if you are able to stay, you wouldn't get a promotion in the next contract. It is the same situation at my university: less publication pressure, but still lots of pressure.

Many scholars criticize it as a new capitalism, an academic capitalism that exploits young people. When you just got your PhD, you are full of energy, you are young. You accumulated data from your PhD research. And you still have time to do more fieldwork, less administrative and responsibility, usually no kid and family obligation. So, the university pushes you to publish more, using all your PhD data to publish.

*But it is always the same data, no update, no new fieldwork?*

No, they do not care about the content of the papers you publish. From the university bureaucracy's point of view, you just need to publish, to accumulate points for advancement of the department, and for the university ranking. Once you get the longer contract, they know you cannot do that anymore.

*You get old, you get back pains and health problems because of the unhealthy work rhythm. Eventually you use up all your energy!*

When young scholars get their second contract, they slow down. The pressure is on the young scholar who just got their PhD and their first contract. They have a tremendous pressure to write, write, write. Publish, publish, publish. The more the better. Also teaching!

*What you are saying reminds me of Alexandre Afonso's (2013) analysis, which argues that the academic job market resembles a drug gang. It is quite inspiring and convincing when you look at the arguments. For him, "Academic systems rely on the existence of a supply of 'outsiders' ready to forgo wages and employment security in exchange for the prospect of uncertain security, prestige, freedom and reasonably high salaries that tenured positions entail". Robinson, Ratle and Bristow (2017) followed the painful experiences of a group of early career academics and analysed how they manage to manoeuvre within the field, developing a 'critical' habitus. In France I think the system for young scholars has now become really harsh too. An enormous part of the university teaching staff lacks a "real contract". They are paid for the amount of hours taught in front of students, not counting preparation time. They are also pressured to work for free for many hours on administrative duties, exam supervisions and other meetings. Most of them are doing their PhD without funding or are already done but do not have a postdoc or a position yet (in France approximately only 30% of PhD students in the social sciences have fellowships). It is really awful the way universities take advantage of such vulnerable people, because these young scholars are qualified to teach but are not granted a real contract nor even health insurance benefits. They need to have teaching experience to increase their chances on the job market, so they accept the situation although they know teaching on an hourly rate does not even pay the rent. Often the university only pays them at the end of the year. And if you compare the paycheck with the hours spent it almost looks like volunteer work – or slavery depending on your level of consciousness or cynicism! After completing my PhD and before securing my first postdoctoral contract in the UK, I taught 'Introduction to Sociology and Anthropology' at Nanterre University on an hourly basis. I calculated that my final income amounted to 3 euros an hour. You get four times this amount as an employee selling fruits and vegetables on a Paris street market, and at*

*least there you get paid at the end of the month, not several months after the end of the semester! Unfortunately, this situation is widespread as in other countries such as the UK<sup>16</sup>.*

## **Part 5. Assigned tasks and government requirements**

My colleague/husband and I, we were lucky because when we graduated in 2008, there was less competition than there is today. They were no rules dictating that where you get your BA determines where you get a university position. We had more opportunities; we could have a position at a university in Beijing if we wanted to. We decided to go back to Chengdu because at provincial universities you have more time for your academic work and for your own life. There is less pressure to finish projects that are assigned to you.

For example, the China Academy of Social Sciences is the highest academic institution in China. They have some research topics which are required by the government. One of my older classmates, who is older than me, got a position at the Academy. He now has these kinds of tasks. Of course, he applied for this position because he did research on related topics. But the topic and the schedule of his study are not always up to him. It is a fixed topic that the government decided before hiring him. The government decided it wanted to know about Chinese people in Paris, their life, their rights. So, now all his research projects have to be on this topic.

*Do you also have commissioned research from the government?*

Yes, sometimes.

*With the task you also get points?*

Yes. Of course!

*Is it mandatory?*

You can refuse. But it might influence your salary and your advancement. Because it is an easy way to get points! Government-commissioned research is easier to publish. You also get points when you send the report from this commissioned project to the government. They evaluate your report, through short comments that emphasize one or few good suggestions or acclaim the whole report. These comments give you points. A report can receive the signature of the Prime Minister, then it can bring in a great amount of points! Then you would become a politician! (*Both laughing.*) More seriously, I do not refuse this kind of report, but it should not count as “academic points”, since it is not the aim of your academic career.

*You mean because the research question is not up to you and then not built up neutrally and scientifically appropriate? Or the report does not count as academical because it is not included in your own research topics, hence there is a problem of legitimacy of the results?*

I mean, I do not object with intellectuals being involved in the governance of the country. That's also our obligation, and it can deserve some awards and encouragements. Writing a report based on one's academic achievements is of course an academic practice, but it is not the aim or ideal of one's academic career. I do not think a report getting a remark from the high governance should be regarded as 'academic achievement'. What's more is, if this kind of reports is evaluated as more important than fundamental academic work, it will undermine the creativity of scholars. Just as an old Chinese term

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/nov/16/part-time-lecturers-on-precarious-work-i-dont-make-enough-for-rent>



says, it is like “planting a tree upside down” (本末倒置, *benmo dao zhi*), then how this academic tree gets to thrive?

*When researchers work on a commissioned project, are they influenced by the fact that if members of the government like the report they might get more points, meaning more income and higher chance at advancement?*

Of course. We social scientists are supposed to propose critical, innovative and radical thoughts, but sometimes we cannot go that far. If you want to communicate critical results, you need to find a balance. First you compliment with beautiful words, and then little bit of criticism, be critical enough but not too much. You need to criticize step by step to avoid getting yourself into trouble.

*I saw what you describe in quite a lot of Chinese papers on the consequences of the Three Gorges Dam resettlement. Criticism was slowly included a few years after the end of the relocation process. Even though the authors show balance in the introduction and conclusion of their paper, they manage to transmit their data and present acute and critical arguments that are helpful to their colleagues in the field and will definitely help future similar research.*

## **Part 6. National projects & a unreasonable academic system scholars have to play through**

*Is it easy to get a national project in China?*

No.

*What is the percentage of success? In France, the national project rate success is around 10-14%.*

I think it is much lower in China. The academic population in China is huge. Every university encourages the scholars to apply for a national project. You get many applicants. Most of them know they cannot get it. But they apply anyway to make the figures of the University look good. Some universities will give you points for your application, regardless of whether or not you really have a chance to succeed. The rate of applications is really not a reliable indicator of the rate of success in China.

*What is the management system of these National projects?*

National projects in social sciences are managed by the National Social Science Foundation of China (国家社会科学基金 *guojia shehui sheke jijing*). This foundation is managed by a special office. There is a committee with reviewers from different universities and institutions. You fill up the application forms and upload it on their web site. When you apply, you need to pick a discipline. Then alumni experts, scholars who already finished one or several national projects, review the applications anonymously. Usually three persons evaluate one project. But you never receive any feedback. Sometimes you know who evaluated your project because your field is so small. Some applicants work very hard to find out who is on the list so they can try to influence the decision. In our university, one really had to work to establish a *guanxi* relationship with the reviewer by paying regular visits, sending them gifts, or publishing their papers if they are in an academic journal editorial board.

*Does it work? Is it not possible that scholars object and disclose these practices?*

It is helping in many occasions, but since it is so competitive, the quality of a proposal is the most important. Obviously, most reviewers will not take the bribes since they know it is illegal. But sometimes it is not that obvious. Applicants might behave like a friend, inviting you to give a lecture at

their university. It is blurry; it cannot easily be categorized as an attempt at corruption. It can be part of the healthy relationship you establish with colleagues from your field. Sometimes it is not only academic relationships, it can be friendly, on a personal level, through affinities. In my case, whatever relationship I have with a colleague, if I get to evaluate his or her proposal, I would base my opinion on the proposal. But sometimes the relationship can exert influence. If two proposals are equally good, and I realize that my instinct drives me to naturally favor the researcher I know because I know from experience that he or she is a dedicated, professional and good scholar and that the supporting department is a good one with good working conditions, then I know the project will be successfully carried out. I find it difficult to see that as corruption myself.

*I know what you mean, it is also a problem we face in France. Sangren (2007) has bluntly pointed out the deeply anchored dark side of our profession where scholars tend to form a “front-stage” kind of utopian fantasy of the academia as “a free marketplace of ideas”, while we are well aware for instance that “networking, exchanges of favours, bias, narcissism and much worse contaminate this free marketplace of ideas”. We indeed should bravely face such deeply rooted twisted behaviours, be reflexive and pro-active about them. However, production of healthy, benevolent, productive and ethical collegial relations can be cultivated too. They cannot always be seen as a bad thing. It is part of the connection you make with colleagues you came to respect for their achievements, their dedication, and their work ethic. I personally feel more comfortable to recusing myself if I know the person whose work I have to evaluate. But sometimes it is not as easy since research domains can be small.*

For the National project, it depends on the discipline you apply in. For instance, sociology is a huge discipline in China. There are many scholars and many applicants all over the country. It is difficult to establish relationship circles. In contrast, ethnology is a relatively small world in China. All the seniors were trained in the 1960s in the *minzu* studies [Chinese minority ethnic groups studies]. They established a close circle. If you are not part of this circle, if you are young or doing anthropology, not doing classical *minzu* studies, if you are critical, it is very difficult to get a national project approved.

*Even Wang Mingming<sup>17</sup> students?*

Yes. For national project applications, we usually apply in sociology rather than in ethnology. Because you have no chance in ethnology. Well, sometimes anthropology scholars get through anyway, but the odds are very low. When the theme of your project is about religion you can apply in the “religion section”.

My husband and I applied for a national award at the Minzu Affair Committee in the same year. He applied in Sociology, I applied in Ethnology. We felt it would be better if we were not in competition. He got the second prize, I got nothing. When I saw the names of the scholars who received the award in Ethnology, they were all from this small circle. I am not in the circle.

*Do some scholars protest, file complaints or ask for better recognition for their discipline? In France, for instance, economy as a discipline has been attracting criticism. Institutional positions and committee memberships are being monopolized by mainstreamers (i.e., economists whose work uncritically conveys orthodox views akin to neoliberal ideology) while other economic trends can hardly secure positions where they might propose alternative views in publications and course curricula. In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, a group of “Appalled Economists” was founded, allowing them to*

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<sup>17</sup> Wang Mingming 王铭铭 (1962-) is a Chinese anthropologist. After a Ph.D and several post-doc fellowships in the U.K., he returned to China in 1994 to work at the Institute of Sociology and Anthropology of Peking University where he became professor. He is also special professor of anthropology at the Central Minzu University. He holds direction positions in Chinese academic and was part of visiting scholar programs at Sandford and the Chicago University anthropology department.

organize and have better visibility<sup>18</sup>. But “unorthodox” economy still lacks institutional recognition in France today. Whatever the discipline, French scholars sometimes find the evaluation or recruitment process to be unfair and unethical, and this generates controversy. Sometimes French scholar unions get involved. Sometimes hiring committees need to explain themselves. I even witnessed a recruitment in anthropology being cancelled after the selection process and ranking announcement was done. And in any case, it can affect the credibility and professional standing of the members of the committee.

Situation in Ethnology is also changing with younger generation’s efforts. For the national projects’ application, you have no feedback on your proposal. You cannot ask. There is no channel to ask why your application was not considered favorably. The only thing you can do is look at the accepted proposal or award to reflect upon what you can do next year. And you can consult senior scholars.

*I see. French and European Project applications include mandatory feedback from evaluators, so you know the criticism that have been made on your project. Do scholars in China reflect upon the academic system and try to ask the government or institution to change when negative effects are pointed out?*

Some scholars do, but most of us just rely on this system. We work through it and try to get a national project in these conditions. If you do not have a national project, it is very hard to get the professorship.

This is the new system of evaluation and recruitment in China. I created two concepts. For me we have two kinds of “outstanding” researchers. The “outstanding in forms” (表格优秀, *biaoge youxiu*) and “outstanding inside” (内在优秀, *neizai youxiu*). Scholars outstanding inside are those who have passions in their academic work, or following Weber’s word, they take academic research as their vocation. While the ‘outstanding in forms’ are those who are good at calculation for cumulating many points. They are satisfied with writing a mediocre paper but try hard to publish it in an A rank journal. Their goal is to get high points, and hence a higher salary. When you look at their forms you think they are outstanding scholars, but when you invite them to give lectures at your university, you will be disappointed. Some scholars, of course, are both: outstanding in forms and outstanding inside. One of my colleagues got a really beautiful form. National projects: 2. National rewards: 2. Publishing in C, B and A Journals. But he is really boring, you talk to him you get nothing. He does not involve himself in research. He only works on the forms. He makes sure that there are no blanks when he fills them in. When he realized he needed a national project, he studied the guidebook for the national project carefully. He spotted the topics he knew that few people would apply to, and he applied on that topic because it is easy to get.

*So there are some suggestions in the national projects. Who makes them?*

Each year there are topics suggested for each discipline, decided by a committee. These suggestions come from all over China. Then, the office of the funding collects these topics, then figure out a guide of topics with a committee together. For instance, the government might say: This year the theme is “a new age” (*xin shidai*). So, you can find this word in many of the suggested topics. For instance, when I finished my application project I realized my title could be improved, I just added “in the new age” at the end. (*both laughing.*) It is kind of a game now. You see I try to be outstanding inside and in forms!

*In order to distance yourself from the academic system’s flaws and manage to do what you feel is right in your conscience, as a researcher, you may first need to get through the system, understand how it operates and even succeed by its standards, so as to better go around it, and maybe have a possible way to modify it, from the inside.*

Consciousness is so crucial for scholars. Zhang Yuan and I prefer to apply to national projects with research topics we find are stimulating even though the topic may be very competitive. In China there

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.atterres.org/page/manifesto-english>

are lots of outstanding “inside” scholars who do not get enough points. For instance, there are those who write great papers but very slowly. Others cannot get many points because they are not good enough at networking and cannot get published in many A-ranked journals. Even if your paper might be a good fit for one journal in particular, if you do not have the *guanxi*, sometimes you cannot get it published and you need to find another A journal that is more open, more objective, but less appropriate to the topic of your paper. Outstanding “inside” teachers sometimes have higher requirements for students. Students might finish the tasks but complain that they are too difficult. Some really good professors who are serious at teaching have fewer students in their class because they are so hard and strict. It is not cost-efficient because if you spend lots of time on the courses and individual tutoring you do not get high scores. For my husband, since he is a very humorous person, his teaching is hard but still attractive, so students give him high points. I am not that strict, and students give me high points too. We are happy to get high points, but we are happier to see students really benefiting from our teaching.

In a word, in such a points system, you seem to be evaluated by an objective, rational, equal standard: everyone is in the same predicament. But as I said earlier, it will not encourage teachers on improving teaching. I would say it is an institution with very low efficiency at all levels. We were even lucky because now, the pressure is excruciating for young scholars. From the outside the system looks like very efficient. And since most of us survived in this system, the survival rate makes the state think it is working, that it is a good system for academia, a reasonable one.

*It gives the wrong impression that it is working but in fact it just shows the great resilience of (a selected few) scholars willing and able to adapt to a very hostile environment.*

You can always survive but it does not mean the system is reasonable. Zhang Yuan and I only survive because we never take it seriously. We take it seriously enough to get career advancement, as we did to get the professorship. But we do not take it seriously as an efficient system for academic life.

I got two national projects in 8 years. It looks outstanding in the forms, so I got a high reputation. But this reputation is only within the system. The project I am excited about, the one on the Dujiangyan irrigation/water-controlling system, is difficult to fund through a national project. The problem is it is a huge waste of time, because you still need to finish the report for the national project. It takes up precious time.

*Why cannot stimulating topics be funded through national projects? Are the topics suggested for national projects inadequate from an academic point of view?*

This funding pattern encourages academic work with ‘practical value’. But things are changing these days. There are more projects on theory and fundamental research. The two national projects for which I received funding were related to disaster studies. Both of them included a little bit of criticism, e.g., on issues of desertification in the Alpine wetlands and grasslands of the Tibetan Plateau. I included the criticism in my report, explaining that desertification, to some extent, was actually promoted by governmental policies and that different policies could alleviate the problem in the future. It is safe for me since I presented the problem in an academic way. It is not our job to only present praise, but we clearly understand that to preserve our academic life, we should base our criticism on solid academic analysis. As a guest professor at EHESS this year I gave four talks, two of which were derived from a national project. So, you see we can still achieve something academically with a national project. In many disciplines you need critical thinking. But some scholars do not dare to voice any criticism in their project reports. They just list data. This system in China encourages people to just accumulate data without analysing them, just to survive in the system. It does not encourage scholars to think critically. People like us have self-awareness and try hard to keep in line with our academic conscience (学术良心, *xueshu liangxin*).

We try to keep a balance between two kinds of excellence. Never be “normal” in forms because you need that form for your salary and your career advancement. And at the same time, try your best to be outstanding “inside”, do real academic work. Be critical in an academic way.

## **By way of a conclusion**

*For Feng (2015), the principal victim of the points system is professional conscience. According to him, if this system is not abolished, the pressure to lower standards (e.g. for teaching) and to condone plagiarism and fraudulent behaviour will cause the demise of scholarly ethics. In a system that not only encourages but selects ethically questionable behaviour, the incurred risk for academia is to see them increase. It might get more and more difficult to maintain our principles.*

*I am also worried about another type of behaviour that seems to increase through the pressure, namely the constant evaluation of oneself and others and the discourse of excellence promoted by the neoliberal academia: the continuous suspicion among peers and the ambient discourse on mediocrity – which seem to blur out mediocrity inside and mediocrity on forms. As Feng (2015) puts it, the excellence discourse is exacerbated along with the competition over the small cake to be shared. This creates a pernicious atmosphere and is unproductive, since in science “one researcher and one academic institution’s progress is everyone’s progress, [...] research is a collective endeavour” (Gaudin, 2020). In this auditing system, researchers are supposed to be excellent in all they do, and they must do lots of activities (to prove that they are deserving and useful) while at the same time not enjoying enough time and sometimes even basic materials support to develop their activities<sup>19</sup>. If scholars do not have time to read, analyse their data and work on their manuscripts at length, it is difficult to reach “excellence”. Then, how can we distinguish honest scholars who follow their conscience but ‘produce less’, great scholars who have been squeezed so tight that they end up burning out and ‘producing less’, scholars who lack basic materials and the moral conditions to flourish (not all of us are warriors), from the “international stars” that produce the image of excellence (based on quantitative criteria) only by using an army of subalterns (students and assistants on contingent jobs). Feng (2015) calls them “bosses” leading “family enterprise”. Neoliberal academia seems to bring back the mandarin regime; reports of moral and physical abuse of subalterns have been strongly acknowledged in the mobilization against the Multi-Annual Research Programming Act. Peacock (2016) recalls that autonomy and dependency are co-produced. The normalization of casual employment within the academy leads to great dependency, with all the excess it can bring.*

Our colleagues and us also criticize the ‘bosses’ leading ‘family enterprise’, and we all refuse our students addressed us ‘boss’. Addressing your supervisor as ‘boss’ was very popular in years. There’s a trend of a new policy: supervisors pay their PhD students monthly (about 100 Euros) to support students’ study. If you have no projects, then you are not qualified to supervise PhD students. Such system lowers the risk of scholars taking advantage of their students. It also makes sense that scholars supervise topics close to their area of expertise, and that both their progress help each-other, while it is terrible to force students helping your own project. If a student is interested in a topic with no relation with their project, what should the supervisor do? In China it is illegal to support a research having nothing to do with the project.

*You make good points. In France, they are no such rules. To my view, the relationship between Ph.D even Master students and supervisors would need safeguards. There are signed charter and the department can alleviate tension but when problems and abuse occur, the symbolic and effective power*

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<sup>19</sup> It is common in France to see social and human sciences researchers with no office, having to work from home on self-funded IT tools, participating in international conferences and even partially funding fieldwork on their own salaries, which are proven to be comparatively lower to their peers from other OECD countries.

*embodied by some bully supervisors might prevent the student to reach for help in fear of retaliation. I am not saying it is systemic or even specific to the academia, it is a power issue in relation with subalterns. But it can happen, and as colleagues and decent human beings I think we should pay attention to abusive practices, especially when we secured position and can better face retaliation of powerful beings. It is not always easy because sometimes you do not have all details of what's going on, you feel it is not your business and do not know how to point out the problem to your colleague. Signs of abuse should in any case be taken seriously and cleared out.*

You might find me quite peaceful even presenting critics. We could endlessly discuss examples illustrating problems in our respective academic systems. It is easy to be cynical but the most important thing is to figure out the cause for the problems and find solution. Some are rooted in the neoliberal agenda, while others are deeply embedded in the earliest form of the university and academia around the world. What we should do is rise above problems regardless of their origins. Even though complaining about them feels good and allows us to make these issues visible to our peers and institutions, we should not wallow in complaints. As an old saying goes: “do not stop eating because of an unexpected choking” (不要因噎废食). At our modest level, we have the responsibility to maintain our professional consciousness. Day by day, we can influence the system through our choices, our teaching and research activities. We can be rigorous in our work even though there are temptations and incentives not to.

*You are entirely right! When I presented the Multi-Annual Research Programming Act to several General Assemblies earlier this year, I always concluded with such an attitude. Many in the academia feel helpless; others try to fight without being heard. But what can be efficient is dispersed micro-resistance supporting one another through practice and with only limited harmful repercussions. Small acts. “Epsilon is better than zero”, often claims says Aurelien Barrau (2019), an astrophysicist struggling much in the French media for public awareness on the ongoing ecological disaster. We can reevaluate mutual support, include Camille Noûs as co-author<sup>20</sup>, and boycott certain editors. Be more tolerant of the plurality of views inside our discipline. Reevaluate the perspective and structural consequences of the mentality of capital accumulation (securing a bonus, becoming influential, surpass this scholar, do many things, faster, no matter the cost, get “one more line” on the resume or evaluation form). Slowly dislodge ourselves from practices and behaviours that we understand now as being unhealthy, unethical, or harmful. This would be of course easier for scholars at the top of the hierarchy and in general those with permanent positions than it is for precarious employees...*

*What are you hoping for in the future of Chinese academia, and Chinese anthropology?*

We live in the same world and we face the same problem in different ways. What we are discussing today is not a new topic. 100 years ago, Weber compared the academic world between German and American. He presented some trends which could lead to negative result. Unfortunately, we were not good at learning from his suggestion but were good at being trapped by those trends. Now, lots of scholars from various disciplines believe establishing an objective and quantitative evaluation system is the most efficient way to lead social science to its equality and autonomy. If there are some negative side effects, it is just because this system is not objective enough. As a result, some reflection on the evaluation system is actually reinforcing the dominance of the objective and quantitative attitude.

For improvement in Chinese anthropology, we should not be satisfied with just introducing foreign theories to China and presenting data to the ‘western’ academic world. We anthropologists need to base our work on the social facts in China, to borrow Durkheim’s concept. There was a paper by Fei Xiaotong in 2000 on “What we can do in the social sciences in China”. He said that first you need to learn the discipline on its own terms. For instance, read Durkheim, because Durkheim is the basis of the social sciences. But at the same time, you need to learn and take into account the vernacular/emic

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.cogitamus.fr/indexen.html>

conceptions in China. You need to build up the relationship between the discipline and real life. You need to communicate with foreign experts and establish a comparative perspective. This is how you understand what Durkheim said and what the social sciences are. And then look at what we have in our own tradition that helps understand the world through a sociological and anthropological lens. You can build social sciences in China that would not be a copy of the western world. We know why Durkheim talked about topics from the period he lived in. We can follow the way he came up with certain questions, how he developed analyses focusing on his contemporary world. We should do the same in China, learn how to define issues, to discover and then resolve problems. It is not a matter of copying concepts. In order to do that you need to do fieldwork, real fieldwork in China, in a real social-scientific way. It is not a matter of gathering data as fast as you can to reach the points target without thinking of the meaning of the research, in the process creating lots of rubbish, just copy-pasting what has already been done, without any new idea or analysis. To understand what China is as a country, you need to look at the history, how the unification of such huge territory was achieved. It might be related to topography or to other elements. Then, you can go further and present your reflections on the anthropological theories. That is what Fei Xiaotong said in his paper, telling scholars to base their work on a social science discipline and theories, and to reflect on theories creatively. I think such recommendation is still relevant in today's China.

*A great paper by Harrell (2015) shows how the vocabulary used by Fei made a theoretical contribution to our discipline. I recall that the goal of a 'native anthropology' was part of the very first project of an anthropology of China as Cai Yuanpei envisioned it during the Republican period (Cai 1967, Liu 2003). This endeavour seems to have been a constant topic of interest among Chinese anthropologists and part of the renewal of the discipline in the 1980s, too (Li 1998, Gao; Qiong 1999). It distinguishes it from French anthropology, which saw its primary emphasis on the study of external others as a heuristic condition for understanding human societies and their own. We all know too well the criticism of this Western anthropological gaze over the world. The development of native anthropologies throughout the world has, however, been highly constrained because of lack of research funds, often still granted by the "West" – though not everywhere; native Japanese anthropology has flourished. China's economic growth will surely enable Chinese anthropologists to follow this path if sufficient funding is granted, and if the academic bureaucratic management does not suffocate them first. Yet beside indigenous anthropology by Chinese researchers, the current of oversea ethnographic research by Chinese scholars (海外民族之研究, Haiwai minzuzhi yanjiu) that developed recently has been aiming to stimulate Chinese anthropological perspectives through fieldwork abroad (Wang 2014), on non-Chinese societies such as France (Zhang 2012). Gao Bingzhong seems quite involved in it. Obviously, such attempts at "describing the world from a Chinese point of view" fits well into the PRC's promotion of soft power through scientific prestige and influence, much like it did for Western powers. I feel deeply that cross-indigenous and exogenous anthropologies should be encouraged, in all directions. A nationalistic posture forbidding the gaze of the external other upon oneself would be a deadlock. Anthropologists around the world face difficulties, even dangers, as the latest case of French Anthropologist Farida Adelkhal's imprisonment in Iran attests<sup>21</sup>. The "European gaze" might be itself slowly reduced if we heed Gefou-Madianou's (2000) warning that the audit ideology in European anthropological funding decisions will eventually end up confining practitioners to indigenous anthropology.*

When I said earlier 'We live in the same world and face the same problem in different ways', what I wanted to emphasize is that we should find solutions based on an understanding of our history in the discipline. Just as you said, we have been pursuing different interests in anthropology or ethnology for a long time. For both of us, I think that understanding and interpreting older generations' research is crucial in order to look into the future. In China, there are only a few scholars working on the history of

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<sup>21</sup> [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/07/09/les-sciences-sociales-sont-en-danger-a-l-echelle-internationale\\_6045667\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/07/09/les-sciences-sociales-sont-en-danger-a-l-echelle-internationale_6045667_3232.html), <https://sciences-critiques.fr/pour-un-droit-a-la-recherche/>.

ethnology and anthropology in a reflective way. My PhD supervisor Wang Jianmin (1997) is one of them. What he taught us during our first class is: “You do not know how little you know about our older generation and their contributions; you just label them as out-of-fashion. So be modest, read their books”. In recent decades, many Chinese scholars have made efforts to re-read works of the first part of 20<sup>th</sup> century and have organized projects of reexamining some of the famous field sites of Fei Xiaotong, Lin Yaohua and their colleagues. By doing these, we will gradually shape our own way of doing research and feed our results back into our theories. I believe it is important for Chinese scholars to do ethnographic research abroad. The perspective of others is always important and should be taken into consideration. Ethnographies on overseas areas are of course very stimulating. However, in the Chinese context, understanding the diversity in our own country is also crucial for anthropologists.

*China is indeed a huge country, with not only minorities but also a plethora of specific localized cultures, endless materials for fieldwork!*

Regarding the overall academic system in China, if this kind of system could change a little bit, the best would be to end the points system and give scholars more space. Find alternative ways to evaluate people. The best would be to evaluate every five years, and to not evaluate papers solely according to the rank of the journal. Other activities should also count in the evaluation, like this visiting professorship, which does not count in the current system. And also slow down, stop pushing so hard.

From my point of view, in France, you have good opportunities and a tradition that encourages you to demonstrate your own opinion.

*Yes, you are right, this is still the case with the Multi-Annual Research Programming Act mobilizing many university teachers, researchers, and students. Yet, another possible pernicious – maybe even expected – effect of the neoliberal and capitalist academia could be to sedate the intellectual tradition of engaging in the public sphere. It might wear out teachers and researchers with work and evaluation goals to reach, providing them with a strategic plan to accumulate financial capital while bitterly and suspiciously fighting each other over it, this leading astray collective attempts of politicization and mobilization among university actors. With other measures discussed in Secondat (2020) and Graeber (2014), it could be also a way to curb the potential of students towards societal and political changes. Thankfully, there are great initiatives developed by scholars. Like the campaign “Reclaiming our University” launched at the University of Aberdeen (Ingold 2018). From a collective discussion emerged four pillars (freedom, trust, education, and community).*

In my view it is crucial for scholars to keep their independence to do real academic work, to be patient. Some people think that all this hard academic and fundamental work is useless, that there is “no result”. Some people think my work on the Dujiangyan world heritage irrigation system is useless because I do not provide any suggestions for tourism or for the conservation of world heritage. However, it contributes to the rethinking of water system, the locality, the frontier, the relationship among ethnic groups, the environment etc. This fundamental research allows me to understand so many things and processes. We need to be patient with fundamental research.

*According to Feng (2015), the point-based system is an obstacle to fundamental research and makes the production of high-level results difficult. In France, countless researchers have pointed out the limits of the money-based system and standardized quantitative evaluation for long-term fundamental work. In particular, they have argued that project-based funding is incompatible with risk-taking and exploratory projects. This became very clear in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and the fundamental research on coronaviruses<sup>22</sup>. Antoine Gaudin recalls that the history of our societies shows that fundamental*

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<sup>22</sup> [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/07/09/les-sciences-sociales-sont-en-danger-a-l-echelle-internationale\\_6045667\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/07/09/les-sciences-sociales-sont-en-danger-a-l-echelle-internationale_6045667_3232.html), <https://sciences-critiques.fr/pour-un-droit-a-la-recherche/>.



*research was what lead to significant discoveries and, in the end, to the most important contributions to the economic and cultural wealth of nations*<sup>23</sup>.

I must say that I am not very optimistic. In China parts of the system are getting worse. Bureaucratism in academic world is also responsible for the evaluation system. The reports we are obliged to give the government must include “helpful suggestions” that have become more and more important in the evaluation system. The amount of points we can receive with such reports is getting higher and higher. In our university some people prefer to focus on these reports. Such reports do not conform to academic logic. They are brief and present very specific proposals or suggestions. A good report relies on long-term research and theoretical reflection. Some people in government genuinely think it is a good way for scholars to participate in today’s world. We scholars all have the responsibility to make the world better. When Cai Yuanpei introduced ethnology to China, he believed this discipline could help us understand our life and present possible ways for our future. He organized fieldwork along the border so that we could establish a modern unified country. It is useless to pretend that anthropology or ethnology are not involved in the economic-political system. What we should keep in mind is that good intentions do not necessarily lead to good results. We have to keep reflecting on our research and the system.

*This issue has also been widely discussed in France lately since the Multi-Annual Research Programming Act plans to reinforce “targeted” research, the topics of which would be decided at the highest level of government. These measures stem from the discourse that social sciences not only should serve society, the country’s standing, and need to be useful – mostly for industry and the economy – but should have immediate short-term applications. This official posture might seem hypocritical when considering the fact that we know how some social sciences research results have been played down, ignored or even criticised by some people in power that clearly do not like these results or do not want to invest in political actions that might alleviate the problems through solutions identified in these studies. Both engaged in the Anthropology of disaster we know well the complains of researchers with extensive work and pertinent results not being heard and taken into account by the politics. The covid-19 pandemic is no exception<sup>24</sup>. The same can be observed with countless works on urban territories, ghetto formation, local radicalism, education inequality, etc. In some case, social sciences studies unveiling institutional discrimination and society unfairness are even openly attacked by government officials claiming these studies are the ones fabricating these issues and nurturing social resistance<sup>25</sup>. The risk with targeted research is that it can be built up through ideological, political, nationalist and economic interest, and be unfavourable to the common good. This state discourse of a “need” and of objectives using social sciences is not unprecedented. Chinese Ethnology was also designed, from the very beginning, as an applied science. In the fall of the Qing Empire and the beginnings of the Republic, the social sciences were invested with a mission to reform the country. Then during the Maoist era it was seen by the powers that be as a way to assimilate the others, much as it was during the emergence of the discipline in France (minorities for China, colonized people for*

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.critikat.com/panorama/entretien/luniversite-a-bout-de-souffle/>

<sup>24</sup> Vogel, specialist in health issues at work, has recently recall how the context have revealed social inequalities and democratic deficit in Europe. At all level, he says, there is a reluctance of mobilizing grass-root/bottom knowledge, usually accompanied by a reduction of social sciences contribution (<https://esprit.presse.fr/article/didier-fassin-et-nicolas-henckes-et-raphael-kempf-et-justine-lacroix-et-nicolas-leger-et-jean-claude-monod-et-florence-padovani-et-jean-yves-pranchere-et-livia-velpry-et-pierre-a-vidal-naquet-et-laurent-vogel/la-democratie-a-l-epreuve-de-l-epidemie-42977>)

<sup>25</sup> Parts of the world of social sciences was mortified when French president Macron recently accused scholars of being “guilty” of causing a “secessionist danger” because of their work revealing racism and race discrimination in France. Scholars were accused by the president of manipulating French youth who were demonstrating against racist police violence. Anthropologist Eric Fassin criticized such anti-intellectual posturing: <https://www.lesinrocks.com/2020/06/12/idees/idees/eric-fassin-le-president-de-la-republique-attise-lanti-intellectualisme/>

France). More recently, the Chinese Academic 863 Program that was launched in 1986 clearly identified prioritized research areas (Wang 2003). Surely, in France as in China, some scholars will find roundabout ways to manage to do what we call 'real academic work' despite these constraints. This does not mean it is a healthy system that will create a better world. In an enlightening argumentation, Harari (2015) demonstrates how the modern sciences in general were used as a tool by empires that funded studies in linguistics, botanic, geography, history, etc. to govern and find strong ideological justifications for their endeavours. Such money and support from political and economic powers have always been crucial for researchers to pursue their own research goals. We could continue to accept this ethically questionable situation of entangled needs. But, as Graeber (2014) puts it, the social sciences in general and anthropology in particular can give society so much more than support for colonization and oppression. What would be an alternative system, then? We could consider the potential benefits of better separating science and research from economic/political powers, especially when public funding is involved. Independence from state and market, as well as dominant elites could prevent some abuse when academic activities are being used as yet another powerful and violent tool for political and economic influence and dominance, or the financial interest of the few. As we saw, the research and higher education system is not neutral in its consequences, it is functioning through political choices. We should not let ourselves fall again into the TINA<sup>26</sup> discourse, as we discussed here, there are indeed efficient and bankable alternatives. Access to higher education and academia should also be reformed so as to mitigate the discrimination process that some groups are facing. It seems that after several decades of progress in this regard, French higher education has become increasingly discriminating over the past few years, with fewer and fewer people from the working classes gaining access to it. We face the risk of coming back to an academic world of dominant elite sharing similar ethos, interests and world view. When there is too much homogeneity among scholars – being gender, ethnic, social and geographic origins – scientific progress and academic creativity are seriously held back.

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<sup>26</sup> The "There Is No Alternative" argument were given in many occasions by neoliberal tenants to support measure such as austerity.

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