"Publish or Perish" Culture is Ruling the Academia in China

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Recently, social media have circulated a story of a Chinese Ph.D. student who was forced to drop out of his doctorate program after eight years and become a delivery man because he failed to accomplish sufficient publishing records to meet the program's graduation requirements [1]. The story rapidly went viral on Chinese social media and drew public controversies regarding the "publish or perish" culture in today's academia. Although the "publish or perish" culture surprises the public with the harsh requirement of completing a doctorate program, it is not a new topic in academia. Early Career Researchers regularly face more difficulties than just the risk of dropping out of the program, like the risk of conducting scientific misconduct, poor quality research, career uncertainties, and mental health issues [2-4]. It is agreed that the pressure created by the "publish or perish" culture can also help ECRs strive and grow. Still, the question is whether such an academic culture beneficial or detrimental to Chinese academia in the long run.

Horta & Li's (2022) qualitative research might give us a hint [5]. Based on the interview with 90 Ph.D. students in China, Hong Kong, and Macau, the study explores the impact of publication pressure on the students' identity trajectories from intellectual, networking, and institutional aspects. The findings show that the perceived centrality of publishing leads doctoral students to:

1. commodify knowledge production and concentrate on 'hot' publishable topics,
2. view research in terms of publication numbers rather than as issues pertaining to

knowledge advancement in response to societal and research challenges,

3. devalue coursework and teaching assistantships (and experience), and

4. consider research in terms of publication numbers rather than as issues pertaining to knowledge.
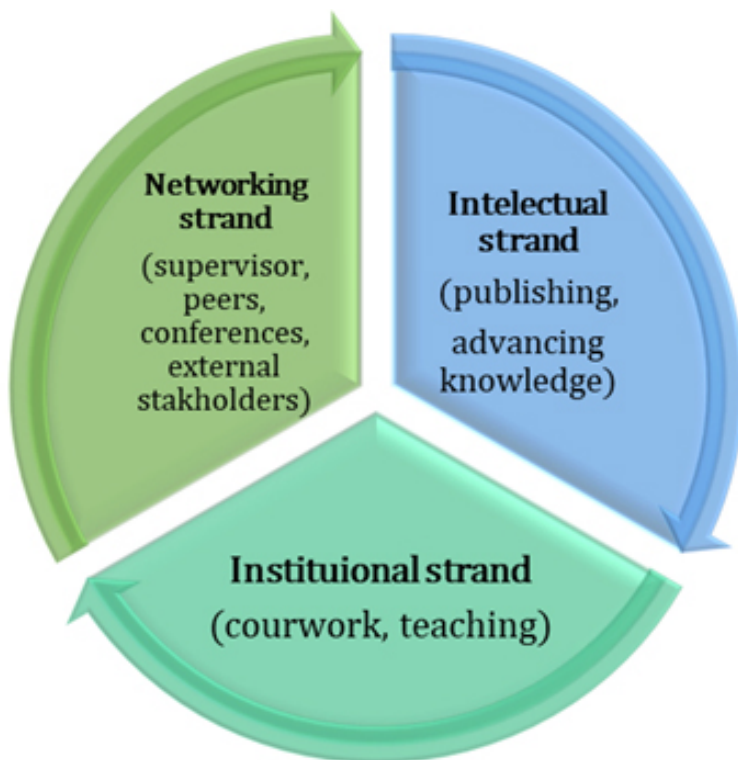

Figure 1. Three strands of identity trajectories. Visualized by the author based on [5]

The authors also argue that the overemphasis on publication during the doctoral program can endanger the long-term viability of academia because the doctorate training and socialization of prospective academics become inadequate, with various factors critical to the academic profession (e.g., teaching experience and socialization) being demoted to a lower level of significance [5].

Viewing the publication centralization issue through the information-processing lens of mindsponge theory can give us more insights into the mental process of Ph.D. students [6]. The theory suggests that a person's thinking and behaviors are driven by subjective cost-benefit evaluation based on the value system shaped by the mindset (set of core values), and such core values are built through the interactions with external environments for natural and social survival desires (e.g., Ph.D. completion, future career, competition with other

peers). Being in a culture that favors publications for degree completion, recognition, and promotion, it is reasonable that the student's mindset is filled with many core values that prioritize intellectual identity trajectory (publishing and advancing publishing-related knowledge) and marginalize institutional (coursework & teaching) and networking aspects (social interaction with peers, supervisors, stakeholders, etc.). Therefore, for more sustainable academia, it is essential to build an academic environment that can balance the benefits for ECRs from various aspects of life, avoiding the myopic view of short-term academic performance.

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