

Research on the Normative Application of Copyright Contracts in Academic Journals: A Case Study of Library and Information Science Journals in China (Postprint)

Authors: Zhang Yin, Han Xinyue

Date: 2023-07-26T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] This study investigates copyright contracts of library and information science journals, analyzes existing problems, and proposes recommendations for improvement. [Method/Process] Copyright contracts published by domestic library and information science journals were obtained through public channels, and a statistical analysis of the contract texts was conducted from the perspectives of execution form, subject matter, rights and obligations stipulations, authorization duration, and execution procedures. [Results/Conclusions] The investigation reveals that copyright contracts of domestic library and information science journals exhibit issues such as lack of rigor and non-standardized execution procedures. It is recommended that journal publishers should attach great importance to copyright contract execution, standardize execution procedures, refine contract texts, adapt to the evolving open access landscape, and better safeguard the rights and interests of all stakeholders.

Full Text

Preamble

Vol. 63 No. 12, June 2019

Research on the Normative Application of Copyright Contracts in Academic Journals: A Case Study of Chinese Library and Information Science Journals

Zhang Yin¹, Han Xinyue²

¹Institute of Medical Information, Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences, Beijing 100020

²National Library of China, Beijing 100081

Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] This study investigates copyright contracts of library and information science journals, analyzes existing problems, and proposes improvement suggestions. **[Method/Process]** Through publicly available channels, we obtained copyright contracts published by Chinese library and information science journals and conducted statistical analysis of contract texts from the perspectives of formation form, subject, rights and obligations agreement, authorization time, and formation procedure. **[Result/Conclusion]** The investigation reveals that copyright contracts of Chinese library and information science journals suffer from lack of rigor and non-standardized formation procedures. It is pointed out that journal publishing units should attach great importance to copyright contract formation, standardize formation procedures, improve contract texts, adapt to the development of open access trends, and better protect the rights and interests of all relevant parties.

Keywords: journal; copyright contract; library and information science; normative application

Classification Number: G237.5

DOI: 10.13266/j.issn.0252-3116.2019.12.003

Copyright is a private right that serves as a vehicle for authors to achieve their spiritual pursuits and economic value. Paper copyright constitutes the primary carrier for academic journals to fulfill their publishing and dissemination functions and provides an important basis for academic journal publishers to develop content resources in various forms. In the print media era, academic journal publishers only needed to manage bilateral copyright relationships between themselves and authors to avoid most copyright-related legal risks. However, with the development of online dissemination and digital publishing, new media forms and distribution models continue to emerge, copyright issues involve a broader range of stakeholders, and their impact on social life and scientific research has deepened. Consequently, academic journal publishers must now manage multilateral copyright relationships among “journal publishers, authors, database vendors, and various types of media platforms” to effectively utilize legal means to protect the legitimate rights and interests of all copyright-related parties and promote the healthy development of academic journal editing and publishing.

Zhang Xiaoqiang et al. investigated the main problems in copyright agreements of Chinese scientific journals, identifying ten issues including unclear subjects, incomplete rights categories, unspecified sub-licensing, and unreasonable contract effective/termination methods, along with suggestions for improvement [11]. As a typical civil contract, the normative nature of copyright contracts directly affects the effectiveness of academic journal publishers in managing copyright relationships. This paper takes Chinese library and information science journals (hereinafter referred to as “LIS journals”) as examples, focusing on the normativity of journal copyright contract texts and formation procedures, analyzing potential risks in depth, and proposing improvement suggestions to

provide references for academic journal copyright contract formation and copyright management.

2. Current Status Analysis of Journal Copyright Contract Formation

Based on the inclusion in *China Academic Journals (Online Edition)* and *Chinese Scientific and Technical Papers and Citations Database*, we identified 70 LIS journals as research subjects. Among them, 36 journals had official websites, and 30 journals provided publicly accessible copyright contracts through their official websites, reflecting the basic situation of copyright contract formation among LIS journals. Data collection was completed in December 2018.

2.1 Form of Copyright Contracts

2.1.1 Contract Formation Form All 30 LIS journals used specialized contracts for copyright matters. Among them, 28 journals published their contracts in prominent positions in download sections or submission interfaces on their websites, allowing direct download after logging in; two journals required registration in their submission systems, where users must click an agreement button to accept copyright contract terms before uploading manuscripts, meaning authors must accept contract terms during submission. Overall, copyright contract content is basically clear, easily accessible, and effectively serves to remind authors to pay attention to copyright matters.

2.1.2 Copyright Transfer Form According to China's *Copyright Law*, copyright transfer forms include assignment and exclusive licensing, distinguished primarily by whether copyright ownership is transferred. Signing a copyright assignment contract grants the journal publisher disposal rights over some or all copyright property rights through author authorization; signing a copyright licensing contract means the author remains the owner of all copyright rights, and the journal publisher only obtains usage rights within a certain scope. Some studies suggest that copyright assignment, with its clear ownership, well-defined rights and responsibilities, strong protection, and smooth transfer, is widely practiced internationally and deserves promotion among Chinese journals [12]. LIS journals generally conform to mainstream copyright transfer forms in domestic and international journal communities: among the 30 journals, 27 adopted copyright assignment, while only three adopted exclusive licensing, including *Journal of Data and Information Science* (JDIS), the only English-language LIS journal published in China, which uses the Creative Commons license (CC license) as an open access journal.

2.2 Subject of Copyright Contracts

The authorizing party for academic journals is typically the paper author, including individual authors and group authors such as research teams; the authorized

party is generally the magazine publisher, editorial office, or journal sponsor. The distribution of authorized subjects in the surveyed copyright contracts is shown in .

2.3 Rights and Obligations Agreement

2.3.1 Rights Agreement of All Parties According to Article 10 of China's *Copyright Law*, 12 rights including reproduction and distribution rights, along with other rights that should be enjoyed by the copyright owner, constitute transferable or licensable economic rights. In journal publishing activities, publishers must first obtain reproduction and distribution rights to complete the publishing process, making these two rights essential components of copyright contracts. Compilation, adaptation, and translation publishing are common business operations for publishers, making corresponding derivative rights such as compilation, adaptation, and translation rights common authorization contents in copyright contracts. In the online dissemination environment, publishers' use of websites, Weibo, WeChat, and other online media for publishing and distribution, as well as authorizing database integrators for dissemination, has become widespread. Therefore, agreements on information network dissemination rights and sub-licensing to third parties have become indispensable in copyright contracts.

Article 34 of the *Copyright Law* stipulates that newspaper and journal publishers may make textual modifications and abridgements to works, but modifications to content require author permission. This means textual modification and abridgement rights are statutory rights and need not be agreed upon in contracts unless for the purpose of reminding authors. Based on the above analysis, reproduction, distribution, compilation, adaptation, translation, information network dissemination, and sub-licensing rights should constitute the core rights content of a copyright contract, with publishers selecting and drafting relevant contract terms according to their operational development needs.

The surveyed subjects provide relatively comprehensive coverage of these core rights. Over 50% of copyright contracts agree to transfer all copyright economic rights, including the aforementioned core rights. Approximately 40% of copyright contracts adopt a model of transferring or authorizing partial rights, providing comprehensive coverage of reproduction, distribution, and information network dissemination rights, but lacking comprehensive expressions regarding compilation, adaptation, and translation rights. This means these journals lack the authority to conduct comprehensive compilation publishing, adaptation and excerpting, and translation dissemination based on papers published in their journals. Only six journals explicitly grant publishers the right to sub-authorize authors' rights to third parties, leaving journal publishers without actual authority to grant database integrators and other operators the right to use papers published in their journals, facing difficulties and legal risks in expanding operations. Additionally, 17 journals claim disposition rights over academic misconduct through contracts, such as rejection, retraction, and public criticism;

two journals clarify rights related to open access and institutional repositories; one journal emphasizes layout design usage rights but does not specify the protection period. According to Article 36 of the *Copyright Law*, publishers have the right to license or prohibit others from using the layout design of their published books and journals, with the protection period ending on December 31 of the 10th year after the work's first publication. JDIS, which uses CC licenses, provides six different levels of licensing modes for authors to choose from, allowing authors to determine the rights and methods by which other entities may use the paper after publication, such as whether commercial use is permitted, whether adaptation and derivative creation are allowed, and claims to rights in derivative works.

The surveyed copyright contracts' agreements on authors' rights can be summarized as follows, as shown in .

2.3.2 Obligations Agreement of All Parties While publishers obtain paper copyright through copyright contracts, they also undertake corresponding obligations, mainly reflected in two aspects: First, obligations regarding publication: seven journals sign copyright contracts with authors after paper acceptance, promising to undertake publication obligations; other journals sign copyright contracts with authors at submission, explicitly agreeing to bear no publication obligation, with the agreement automatically terminating if the paper fails to meet publication requirements. Second, obligations regarding remuneration: six contracts among the surveyed objects stipulate one-time payment of remuneration to authors. For example, *Competitive Intelligence* stipulates "If the paper is published in other forms, no additional remuneration or usage fees will be paid." *Information Studies: Theory & Application* stipulates "The author's copyright usage fee and journal remuneration will be paid in a lump sum."

Compared to publishers' obligations, copyright contracts specify authors' responsibilities more comprehensively and in detail, with authors generally bearing full responsibility for all foreseeable disputes, mainly summarized in four aspects: Academic norm requirements: all surveyed objects propose academic norm requirements, requiring authors to ensure submitted papers are original works, free of academic misconduct, not simultaneously submitted elsewhere, not infringing third-party rights, and not previously publicly published. Authorship requirements: 20 journals' copyright contracts stipulate handling of authorship rights, either requiring authors to guarantee no disputes regarding authorship and ordering, requiring all authors to sign the contract in order of authorship, directly stating "Authors guarantee no disputes over authorship rights, and bear all responsibility if disputes arise" (e.g., *New Century Library*), or requiring "Party A guarantees having reached consensus with other authors, with Party A exercising rights" (e.g., *Competitive Intelligence*). Work-for-hire requirements: requiring authors to declare work-for-hire status, e.g., *Journal of Data and Information Science*. Confidentiality requirements: one journal

requires signing a *Confidentiality Review Certificate*, and 11 journals require “Party A guarantees the paper does not involve confidentiality issues.”

2.4 Authorization Time Agreement

Copyright has a certain protection period, and copyright property rights transfer and licensing are not unlimited from a legal perspective. “Permanent use/authorization” is only a popular expression. Journal publishers should agree on authorization time based on authors’ wishes and their own operational development needs, i.e., the contract’s validity period. The surveyed objects’ agreements on authorization time are shown in , where contract effective time refers to when parties begin to bear legal responsibilities.

2.5 Contract Formation Procedure

Contract formation procedure directly affects contract validity. Reasonable and lawful contract formation is an important guarantee for smooth publication and protection of all parties’ rights and interests. Information technology development has diversified copyright contract formation methods. In addition to both parties signing and stamping paper contracts, electronic contract formation methods such as confirmation through submission systems and authors signing and scanning documents back have gradually become popular and feasible. Specific situations are shown in .

3. Existing Problems and Recommendations

3.1 Existing Problems

Our investigation found that typical problems regarding contract subjects and sub-licensing, repeatedly raised in numerous research results in recent years, still exist in current copyright contracts implemented by LIS journals, along with insufficient coverage of new publishing methods, bringing varying degrees of legal risk.

3.1.1 Insufficient Applicability of Contract Texts Among the 30 journal copyright contracts we obtained, 14 used the copyright contract template provided by the Magtech journal manuscript processing platform without any modification, and another journal only made one simple modification. LIS journals have disciplinary similarities, and copyright contracts as commercial texts following fixed templates are reasonable, playing positive roles in simplifying workflows and standardizing industry practices when applied appropriately. However, we should also recognize existing problems of insufficient applicability and coverage. Taking the Magtech system template contract as an example, it has obvious legal loopholes in legal expression normativity, contract subjects, and authorization completeness: it includes four non-transferable moral rights (right of publication, authorship, modification, and integrity protection) in the transfer scope; it simply identifies “Editorial Office” as the rights transferee

without clarifying whether the editorial office has civil capacity; and it makes no provisions for sub-licensing, geographical scope, or transfer price.

The insufficient applicability of template contracts not only makes it difficult to adapt to the overall trend of diversified journal dissemination and operation but also means that once legal risks erupt, they will bring concentrated adverse effects on the publication of research results in the LIS discipline. This also reflects, to some extent, that journal publishers have weak awareness of legal risks, journal managers and editors lack legal expertise, and journal publishing units lack professional legal counsel. Copyright contracts are often hastily drafted based on reference to peer journals, placing them in a disadvantageous position when facing copyright disputes.

3.1.2 Unqualified Authorizing Subject Editorial offices without independent legal person status lack civil rights capacity and civil conduct capacity, cannot independently enjoy civil rights and undertake civil obligations, and strictly speaking do not qualify as copyright transferees [13]. The non-independent legal person nature of editorial offices creates certain legal risks in copyright contracts signed with authors, particularly regarding subject qualification as a crucial aspect for determining liability in judicial relief during infringement disputes. Sponsoring units without independent legal person status all have independent legal person status and are appropriate legal responsibility-bearing subjects but are not directly identified as authorized subjects.

3.1.3 Lack of Rigor in Contract Texts Some contract texts among our survey objects are written casually, with non-standard terminology, unclear concepts, contradictory clauses, and ineffective prevention of potential disputes and risks between publishers and authors during submission and after publication. Specific manifestations include: imprecise contract language causing ambiguity and misunderstanding, making contracts difficult to perform or even causing disputes. For example, the copyright transfer agreement of *Chinese Journal of Library and Information Science for Traditional Chinese Medicine* stipulates: “After manuscript publication, authors have the right to link the full-text PDF to personal webpages.” From information technology and media perspectives, “personal webpage” can be interpreted differently, creating ambiguity in the application scope of this author right. Regarding “information network dissemination rights,” different journals use different expressions, including “network dissemination rights, electronic media publication rights such as CD-ROM networks,” “electronic publishing,” “data publishing,” “multimedia publishing,” and “network publishing,” indicating a need for improved legal expression accuracy and standardization. The widely adopted template contract stipulates “Once the paper is published in the journal, the author agrees to automatically transfer the paper’s copyright to the editorial office, including electronic publishing, multimedia publishing, network publishing, and other forms of publishing rights.” “The paper’s copyright” refers to all copyright in the sense of copyright law, including moral and property rights, while moral rights such as publication,

authorship, modification, and integrity protection are non-transferable under copyright law. Non-standard legal expression directly affects contract validity.

Contradictory contract clauses also exist. For example, *Journal of Library Science in China* signs a *Paper Copyright Authorization* with authors. Article 1 of the authorization stipulates that authors transfer reproduction, compilation, and other rights to the editorial office, meaning the transfer of rights holders and making the editorial office the sole holder of agreed rights. However, Article 2 stipulates that authors authorize the editorial office to “exclusively use the above rights” and “exclusively represent the author,” where “exclusive use” actually contradicts the “transfer” stipulated in Article 1. *Journal of Data and Information Science*’s paper authorization has the same problem. In such cases, disputes will arise regarding rights holders and liability allocation when handling infringement disputes. Incomplete contract clauses create loopholes, making it difficult to truly achieve legal binding effect. For example, regarding authorization period, copyright itself has a time limit, and contracts lacking authorization periods or with overly short periods are unfavorable for long-term copyright development [14]. Additionally, many contracts make no provisions or only general provisions for liability for breach and dispute resolution, lacking practical significance.

3.1.4 Non-Standard Formation Procedure This mainly manifests in author signature confirmation, with two prominent problems: First, some journals have no author signature confirmation process. Although such texts bear names like “copyright contract” or “copyright transfer agreement,” they lack complete contract elements in practice, only serving as copyright statements without legal binding function. Second, research results from funded projects or programs have particularities regarding copyright ownership, as the funding programs stipulate copyright ownership while providing financial support. In such cases, whether authors enjoy publication rights and whether papers constitute work-for-hire works have various possibilities. Only *Data Analysis and Knowledge Discovery* and *Journal of Library Science in China* among the surveyed objects have fully considered this, while other journals have not paid sufficient attention.

3.1.5 Insufficient Consideration of New Publishing Methods Article 25 of the *Copyright Law* stipulates that copyright assignment contracts should include the work’s name, types of rights transferred, geographical scope, transfer price, date and method of payment, liability for breach, and other matters deemed necessary by both parties. Article 26 stipulates that for licensing and assignment contracts, rights not explicitly licensed or transferred by the copyright owner cannot be exercised by the other party without the copyright owner’s consent. The surveyed contract texts show insufficient consideration of new publishing methods. For example, the widely used template contract makes no provisions for sub-licensing, geographical scope, or transfer price, preventing journal publishers from conducting re-authorization activities. This conflicts with the current trend of diversified journal dissemination and operation, eas-

ily triggering infringement disputes when publishers provide journal papers to database integrators and other information service platforms or develop other new publishing methods. Additionally, CNKI's priority publishing changes the publishing method from journal digital publishing to paper digital publishing, and some journals have already activated priority publishing services in CNKI, but their copyright agreements with authors contain no relevant provisions.

3.1.6 Insufficient Protection of Author Rights Compared with publishers' rights, contracts contain fewer provisions on author rights with limited scope. This situation conflicts to some degree with the principles of equality and fairness in contract formation and is also unfavorable for work dissemination and utilization, negatively affecting authors' enthusiasm for creation and submission. Some contracts make no provisions on author rights, leaving authors unable to clearly understand what rights they retain over transferred or licensed papers, potentially causing unnecessary troubles for both publishers and authors when future uses conflict with publishers' operational development.

3.2 Recommendations

3.2.1 Attach Great Importance to Copyright Contract Signing Signing copyright contracts with paper authors is a basic legal means for academic journal publishers to manage copyright relationships, used to determine the contractual relationship between publishers and authors, obtain author authorization, and clarify rights and obligations of relevant parties, thereby eliminating copyright risks in journal publishing and dissemination. Journal publishers should attach great importance to copyright contract signing, listing it as an indispensable and critical link in the publishing process. Editorial staff should actively study relevant legal systems such as the *Contract Law* and *Copyright Law*, understand contract validity systems and rights and obligations among various contract subjects [15], and continuously adjust contract clauses and content in response to changing copyright environments and latest legal bases. Drafted contract texts should be reviewed by legal professionals for further improvement, and publishers should lawfully exercise their rights and fulfill obligations without harming author rights.

3.2.2 Correctly Establish Qualified Copyright Contract Subjects For journal publishers or editorial offices without independent legal person status, to fundamentally solve the problem of unqualified subjects, either directly identify the legally qualified journal sponsor as the contract subject, such as the corresponding university, research institute, or association; or complete the sponsor's (legal person's) commission and agency permission for signing journal copyright contracts in advance, designating the editorial office head as the legal person's authorized representative to sign copyright contracts with authors, thereby obtaining genuine and effective copyright authorization. The approach of changing the contract subject to the sponsor would, in principle, require not only author signatures but also the sponsor's official seal, potentially complicating journal

publishing work. Consideration could be given to setting the contract to take effect with only the author's signature to increase operational convenience.

3.2.3 Enhance Copyright Contract Text Rigor Copyright contracts are economic legal documents. Their production and signing should be based on law, correctly apply law, and comply with legal procedures. In terms of text form, relevant structures and terminology should be standardized to avoid expression irregularities and ambiguities, thereby improving contract effectiveness. Copyright contract texts should use precise language and comprehensive content. For example, regarding the description of “personal webpage” in *Chinese Journal of Library and Information Science for Traditional Chinese Medicine*, two improvement approaches are possible under rigorous contract principles: either clarify “personal webpage” based on technical elements as “websites with independent domain names created by individuals or groups for non-profit purposes”; or include non-profit public platforms for individual authors' research achievement display in the “personal webpage” scope based on dissemination needs, such as personal profile pages on authors' institutional websites or personal profile sections on WeChat official accounts. Regarding the inconsistent expressions for “information network dissemination rights,” the legal term “information network dissemination rights” should be comprehensively adopted to clarify concepts and rights scope and avoid ambiguity.

To avoid legal risks of exceeding authorized rights scope, it is recommended that journal publishers select the longest possible authorization period within acceptable ranges for authors. The ideal state is author authorization period equaling the protection period of copyright property rights. According to the *Copyright Law*, the protection period for copyright property rights of works by individual authors is the author's lifetime plus 50 years after death; for works by legal persons or other organizations, the protection period is 50 years after publication.

3.2.4 Standardize Copyright Contract Formation Procedures Signature is a basic element for ensuring contract legal validity. In the context of digital publishing, to conveniently and efficiently complete author signature confirmation, multiple approaches can be attempted, such as allowing authors to complete confirmation by uploading scanned copies of signed contracts or through fax, while clearly stating in the contract text that both parties recognize the legal validity of scanned and faxed copies to ensure the reliability of original contracts as primary evidence. To ensure authorization legality, in addition to requiring author signatures, it should be clarified whether the work is funded by projects or programs, and if so, project leader signature confirmation should be obtained. For co-authored papers, generally journals require signatures from all authors for contract effectiveness, but some journals do not mandate signatures from all authors, accepting implied permission from non-signing authors. For example, three journals—*Library and Information Service*, *Data Analysis and Knowledge Discovery*, and *Knowledge Management Forum*—

stipulate in their copyright contracts that “If the paper has multiple authors, all authors must sign; if some authors do not sign, it is deemed that the signing authors are authorized to represent all authors, and the contract is binding on all authors.” *Competitive Intelligence*’s copyright contract stipulates that “If the paper has multiple authors, Party A guarantees having reached consensus with other authors, with Party A exercising rights.” LIS journal co-authors generally number between 2-10, and implementing explicit permission from all authors does not significantly increase the burden on authors and publishers but can effectively block loopholes and risks of implied permission, making contract formation procedures more standardized.

3.2.5 Properly Address Authorization Issues for New Publishing Methods

In an environment of continuous information technology innovation, new journal publishing and dissemination methods emerge constantly and take diverse forms. Journal development of new publishing methods must obtain author authorization or copyright usage authorization, but many existing copyright contracts have omissions in this regard. Currently, cooperation between journal publishers and major database vendors and various media platforms is widespread. Therefore, copyright contracts should not only explicitly permit sub-licensing but also specify implementation methods such as specific scope, methods, and duration of sub-licensing. Additionally, considering mobile publishing and other new publishing methods that may emerge in the future, catch-all phrases such as “all transferable copyright rights” can be added to obtain copyright owners’ transfer of all property rights in papers, minimizing potential future loopholes [16].

3.2.6 Protect Author Rights and Promote Open Access

The open access movement for academic journals, marked by open copyright and resource sharing, has developed rapidly both domestically and internationally in recent years, promoting the transformation and development of academic journal publishing and scientific achievement dissemination. Library and information institutions are major advocates and active participants in the open access movement. However, overall, LIS academic journals have not kept pace with open access development. Among the surveyed objects, only three journals (10%) established open access-related authorization in different forms: *Knowledge Management Forum* stipulates the right to store papers in the institutional repository of the National Science Library of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (ir.las.ac.cn) and authors’ institutional repositories; *Library and Information* publishes an open access policy statement advocating open access of papers on the journal’s website (www.tsyqb.com) and encouraging/supporting open access in authors’ institutional repositories; the English journal JDIS directly uses Creative Commons CC licenses, allowing authors to choose open copyright types and authorization usage forms. Based on the principles of equality and fairness in contract formation and the promotion and implementation of the open access movement, LIS journals should provide authors with more rights space in

copyright contracts, especially by explicitly proposing policies encouraging and supporting the open access movement, thereby facilitating copyright utilization for both journals and authors.

The various existing problems in LIS journal copyright contracts are relatively concentrated. Prominent issues such as unqualified contract subjects and incomplete contract content have not been significantly improved over the years. A large number of journals collectively use imperfect template contracts, responding slowly to new models of academic information publishing and dissemination such as the open access movement and knowledge sharing, failing to fully utilize the professional advantages of the LIS field to improve paper authorization quality and leaving hidden dangers of infringement and legal risks. The Library Society of China Compilation and Publishing Committee and the Library Science Journals Editing and Publishing Professional Committee jointly issued the *Joint Statement on Library Science Journals' Adherence to Academic Ethics and Purification of the Academic Environment*. A similar approach could be adopted for journal copyright work, with relevant institutions taking the lead to call on industry journals to actively participate, jointly develop applicable contract templates or contract clause options, and promote them among library and information science journals, establishing copyright contracts as small-scale industry norms to protect the legitimate rights and interests of library and information science journals.

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Author Contributions

Han Xinyue: Proposed research ideas and framework, wrote and revised the paper.

Zhang Yin: Conducted journal investigation and data statistics, wrote and revised the paper.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.