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Irregularities in the Management of Retracted Papers in Chinese Academic Journal Databases: Manifestations and Recommendations

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Abstract

Objective: To analyze the manifestations of non-standard handling of sporadically and mass-retracted papers in CNKI, Wanfang, and VIP databases, and to propose targeted recommendations with a view to providing reference for standardizing the processing of retracted papers in databases.

Methods: This study investigated the improper handling practices of 404 retracted papers corresponding to 370 sporadic retraction notices and mass-retracted papers across the three databases, tallying for each database the quantities of “papers that should have had retraction notices published but have not yet, papers directly deleted after retraction notice publication, papers not properly processed after retraction notice publication, papers directly deleted without publishing retraction notices, papers directly marked with retraction flags without publishing retraction notices, and papers retracted in other databases but receiving no processing in this database.”

Results: In the CNKI, Wanfang, and VIP databases, the numbers of papers that should have had retraction notices published but have not yet were 282, 205, and 135, respectively; papers directly deleted after retraction notice publication were 58, 97, and 213, respectively; papers not properly processed after retraction notice publication were 104, 189, and 265, respectively; papers directly deleted without publishing retraction notices were 119, 96, and 77, respectively; papers directly marked with retraction flags without publishing retraction notices were 72, 0, and 0, respectively; and papers retracted in other databases but receiving no processing in this database were 91, 109, and 58, respectively.

Conclusion: Relevant authorities should formulate standardized retraction guidelines and strengthen supervision of database retractions; databases should enhance awareness of retraction standards and establish and improve

retraction systems, thereby strengthening academic misconduct governance and promoting research integrity construction.

Full Text

Preamble

Misconduct Performances and Suggestions for Processing Retraction Papers in Chinese Journal Databases

Abstract:

[Purpose] This study analyzes misconduct performances in the processing of both sporadic and large-scale retraction papers across CNKI, Wanfang, and Weipu databases, offering targeted recommendations to standardize retraction processing practices. [Methods] We investigated misconduct performances related to 404 retracted papers corresponding to 370 retraction statements in the three databases, quantifying six categories of non-compliant processing: papers requiring but lacking retraction statements; papers deleted directly after retraction statement publication; papers with non-standard post-publication processing; papers deleted without published retraction statements; papers marked as “retracted” without published retraction statements; and papers retracted in other databases but left unprocessed in the target database. [Findings] In CNKI, Wanfang, and Weipu respectively: 282, 205, and 135 papers required but lacked retraction statements; 58, 97, and 213 papers were deleted directly after retraction statement publication; 104, 189, and 265 papers received non-standard post-publication processing; 119, 96, and 77 papers were deleted without published retraction statements; 72, 0, and 0 papers were marked as retracted without published retraction statements; and 91, 109, and 58 papers retracted elsewhere received no processing. [Conclusions] Relevant authorities must formulate standardized retraction guidelines and strengthen database supervision, while databases themselves should enhance restandardization awareness and establish robust retraction systems to improve academic misconduct governance and promote research integrity.

Keywords: Chinese journal databases; Retraction statements; Retraction paper processing; Misconduct performances

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In recent years, Chinese authors have faced frequent large-scale retraction incidents in international journals, provoking strong reactions in the publishing community. Notable cases include: 70 retractions in *Acta Crystallographica* (2009) [1]; 41 retractions by the UK-based BioMed Central in March 2015; 64 retractions (mostly Chinese-authored) by Springer in August 2015; 107 retractions (primarily by Chinese authors) in Springer’s *Tumor Biology* in April 2017 [2]; and 434 retractions in the *Journal of Fundamental and Applied Sciences* (2019) [3]. In contrast, Chinese-language academic journals have seen far fewer

retractions. Previous studies identified only 45 retraction statements (55 retracted papers) before 2011 [5]; 83 retraction statements (92 retracted papers) in CNKI up to November 2013 [6]; 38 retraction statements (59 retracted papers) in Wanfang up to December 2015 [7]; and 54 retracted papers across the three major Chinese databases between January 2017 and December 2019 [8]. Scientifically standardized retraction processing maximizes the deterrent function of retractions and purifies the academic environment. Existing research has focused primarily on distribution patterns [9], characteristics [3][10][11][12], discovery mechanisms [13], citation patterns [14][15], and governance of unretracted problematic papers [16]. Limited studies have addressed processing standards, such as Yang’s investigation of retraction processing statements [1] and Jiang’s comparative analysis of PubMed and domestic databases [17]. However, no prior research has examined the hidden quantitative relationships among various misconduct types, nor has it assessed whether misconduct has improved over time. This study quantitatively investigates retraction processing misconduct across the three major Chinese academic journal databases from their inception through December 31, 2021, examining the six categories mentioned above, and offers recommendations from both regulatory and database perspectives to standardize retraction processing and strengthen research integrity.

1.1 Data Sources and Research Methods

Data were collected from June 6–10, 2022. We first searched CNKI, Wanfang, and Weipu using advanced search interfaces with terms including “retraction statement,” “retraction announcement,” and “retraction application” in titles, keywords, abstracts, and subjects, covering publications through December 31, 2021. We manually screened and downloaded valid retraction statements (defined as any document expressing retraction intent), recording statement titles, retraction dates, and original publication dates in Excel. Secondary searches using terms like “statement,” “apology,” and “announcement” were conducted to ensure comprehensiveness. After removing duplicates, we tallied total retraction statements and corresponding retracted papers per database and across all three databases.

Next, we investigated sporadic retractions by individually searching each retracted paper’s title in each database to determine: retrievable papers, papers marked as “retracted,” and papers linked to their retraction statements. We also searched journal titles to identify problematic papers that should have been retracted (if a database indexed a journal during both the paper’s publication year and retraction year, it should have processed the retraction). Using these data and the quantitative relationships defined in Section 1.2, we calculated six metrics for each database: papers requiring but lacking retraction statements; papers deleted directly after retraction statement publication; papers with non-standard post-publication processing; papers deleted without published retraction statements; papers marked as retracted without published retraction statements; and papers retracted elsewhere but left unprocessed.

Finally, we examined large-scale retraction events (Dong Peng and Liang Ying cases) by searching author names and affiliations across the three databases to identify retrievable retracted papers, papers marked as retracted, and paper-statement linkages. The data collection and analysis workflow is illustrated in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper].

1.2 Concept Definitions and Quantitative Relationships

The term “misconduct” (失范) refers to actions violating established retraction standards, including COPE’s 2009 *Retraction Guidelines*, the *Medical Journal Editorial Ethics Code* (2018), the *Scientific Journal Publication Ethics Code* (2019), the Chinese Medical Association’s *Recommended Standards for Post-Publication Retractions* (2015), the *Third Military Medical University Journal Publication Ethics Code* (2016), and CNKI’s retraction policies. “Non-standard post-publication processing” refers to failures to mark papers as retracted, apply retraction watermarks, or link retraction statements to retracted papers. “Unprocessed papers from other databases” refers to papers retracted in other databases but left without statements, markings, or watermarks in the target database.

The following quantitative relationships apply within each database (all quantities refer to the same database):

- Papers requiring but lacking retraction statements = Total problematic papers indexed – Papers corresponding to published retraction statements
- Papers deleted directly after retraction statement publication = Papers corresponding to retraction statements – Retrievable papers corresponding to retraction statements
- Total deleted papers = Total problematic papers indexed – Total retrievable papers
- Papers deleted without published retraction statements = Total deleted papers – Papers deleted after retraction statement publication
- Papers marked as retracted without published retraction statements = Total papers marked as retracted – Papers marked as retracted after retraction statement publication
- Unprocessed papers = Retrievable papers without retraction statements – Papers marked as retracted without published retraction statements

2.1 Analysis of Misconduct in Sporadic Retraction Processing

After removing duplicate retraction statements across databases, we identified 370 valid retraction statements covering 404 retracted papers from 313 journals. CNKI, Wanfang, and Weipu published 123, 164, and 231 retraction statements respectively, with 27 statements shared between CNKI and Wanfang, and 86 shared between Wanfang and Weipu. Among the 404 retracted papers, 102 were completely deleted from all three databases, while 302 remained retrievable in at least one database. The retrievable papers consisted of 223 in CNKI, 201 in

Wanfang, and 110 in Weipu, with 135 retrievable in both CNKI and Wanfang, 75 in both CNKI and Weipu, 86 in both Wanfang and Weipu, and 64 retrievable in all three databases. Applying the quantitative relationships from Section 1.2 yielded the data presented in Table 1 .

Table 1: Retraction Statement Publication and Processing Misconduct for Sporadic Retractions (Unit: Papers)

[Table content would be preserved here with proper formatting]

Our investigation revealed that during the publication years of the 404 retracted papers, CNKI, Wanfang, and Weipu indexed 400, 390, and 400 journals respectively, meaning they each indexed 400, 390, and 400 problematic papers. Misconduct manifested in six areas:

2.1.1 Failure to Publish Required Retraction Statements All three databases exhibited failures to publish required retraction statements. As shown in Table 2 , CNKI, Wanfang, and Weipu left 282 (70.50%), 205 (52.03%), and 135 (33.75%) papers without required statements. These unprocessed papers were either deleted directly, marked as retracted without statements, or left unchanged without any markings or watermarks. Such papers remain available for download, reading, and citation like normal publications, posing severe risks—particularly for medical or engineering papers containing erroneous data—and generating significant negative impacts on academia.

2.1.2 Direct Deletion After Retraction Statement Publication In all three databases, retrievable papers corresponding to retraction statements were far fewer than the total papers covered by statements, indicating widespread direct deletion after statement publication. CNKI, Wanfang, and Weipu deleted 58 (49.15%), 97 (51.32%), and 213 (80.38%) papers respectively after publishing retraction statements. According to CNKI’s content management policies, deletion is reserved for content that is defamatory, rights-infringing, confidential, subject to court judgments or government enforcement, or otherwise illegal or unsuitable for online dissemination [18]. The retracted papers in this study do not meet these criteria and should be retained with “retracted” markings, watermarks, and statement linkages to ensure traceability.

2.1.3 Non-Standard Processing After Retraction Statement Publication Only CNKI marked 14 retracted papers as “retracted” after statement publication, but without applying watermarks or linking statements to papers. Wanfang and Weipu failed to mark any retracted papers, apply watermarks, or establish statement-paper linkages. This inadequate processing and promotion of retractions undermines their intended function of alerting readers, leading to continued citation of retracted papers with similarly severe consequences. Authors and editorial offices must therefore verify the authenticity and validity of references to avoid citing retracted work.

2.1.4 Direct Deletion Without Retraction Statement Publication As shown in Table 1, CNKI, Wanfang, and Weipu deleted 44.25%, 48.98%, and 72.50% of their total problematic papers, with 29.75%, 24.37%, and 19.25% deleted without published retraction statements. As platforms documenting scientific history, databases should comprehensively record all scientific literature and development processes, promptly identifying and correcting errors to foster healthy research development [13]. Increasing numbers of deletions without statements create severe consequences: they eliminate retraction traceability, leaving readers who downloaded or cited the papers before deletion confused and distrustful of database credibility; they also undermine the deterrent effect of retractions on academic misconduct, as most deletions involve research integrity violations, thereby impeding misconduct governance and integrity construction.

2.1.5 Direct “Retracted” Marking Without Statement Publication Only CNKU marked 72 papers as “retracted” without publishing retraction statements, and without applying watermarks. Wanfang and Weipu exhibited no such cases. Direct marking without statements renders retractions unscientific, non-standardized, and unrigorous, preventing readers from understanding retraction reasons. If other databases also fail to mark these papers, they remain available for download and citation, with similarly severe consequences for misconduct governance and integrity building.

2.1.6 Unprocessed Papers from Other Databases None of the three databases linked retraction statements to retracted papers or applied retraction watermarks. As shown in Table 1, CNKI, Wanfang, and Weipu left 91, 109, and 58 papers unprocessed—without statements, markings, or watermarks—despite retractions being published in one or both of the other databases. In practice, readers rarely verify whether downloaded papers have been retracted, typically downloading from whichever database they first search. Cross-database collaboration in retraction processing is therefore essential.

2.2 Analysis of Misconduct in Large-Scale Retraction Processing

We also examined misconduct in two domestic large-scale retraction cases: Dong Peng and Liang Ying.

2.2.1 Dong Peng Retraction Case In 2016, *Legal Evening News*, *Chengdu Business Daily*, *The Beijing News*, and other media reported on Dong Peng’s academic misconduct. Dong, formerly a merchandiser at Carlisle (Meizhou) Rubber Products Co., fabricated identities as a collaborator with renowned university doctoral and postdoctoral researchers, falsified research projects, and extensively plagiarized published papers [12]. Between 2011 and 2016, he published 681 papers in CNKI under Carlisle Company, Casta Group, and AIP Group, plus over 90 and 50 papers respectively, totaling 821 papers [12]. Additional searches for “Dong Peng + Tongda Management” and “Dong Peng +

Shunda Management” yielded over 50 and 20 papers respectively, totaling over 70 papers [19]. Author affiliations also included Yida Consulting Management Co., Ltd. and Zhongyi Consulting Management Co., Ltd. [20], though paper counts for these were not recorded.

Searching the three databases using Dong Peng’s name and seven affiliations yielded the results shown in Table 2. CNKI, Wanfang, and Weipu contained 532, 334, and 582 retrievable papers respectively. CNKI marked 517 papers as “retracted,” leaving 15 unmarked, including *Discussion on Enterprise Master Production Scheduling, Transformation and Development Path of China’s Air Cargo*, and *Diagnosis and Treatment of Production Anomaly Events in Small and Medium Manufacturing Enterprises*. Wanfang and Weipu marked none as retracted.

Comparing publication counts with retrievable counts indicates that CNKI deleted at least 309 papers published under “Carlisle, Casta, and AIP Group” without publishing retraction statements. Yang’s study found 279 such deletions as of February 2018 [12], suggesting at least 30 additional papers were deleted in the subsequent four years. Among our 370 retraction statements, only CNKI published a single “Retraction Announcement” in April 2016, retracting Dong Peng and Hu Yongjun’s August 2015 paper *New Trends in Local University Target Management* from *Shanghai Educational Evaluation Research* due to serious plagiarism; the paper was deleted directly after statement publication. Wanfang and Weipu published no retraction statements.

Based on publication counts from literature [15][16] (681, 90, 50, 50, and 20 papers from five affiliations) plus two additional affiliations with 2 retrievable papers each in CNKI, Dong Peng required retraction of at least 895 papers in CNKI—4.9 times the 183 papers retracted by Japanese Toho University anesthesiologist Yoshitaka Fujii [21]. Given similar journal coverage across databases, Wanfang and Weipu likely indexed approximately 895 papers each, implying 599 and 313 direct deletions respectively. Table 2 summarizes misconduct in the Dong Peng case.

2.2.2 Liang Ying Retraction Case Liang Ying, formerly a professor at Nanjing University’s School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, had 125 search results on Baidu Academic linking to CNKI, Wanfang, Weipu, Baidu Wenku, Docin, and Doc88, all showing “article does not exist” or “page cannot be viewed” [22].

Searching CNKI, Wanfang, and Weipu using author name “Liang Ying” and affiliation “Nanjing University School of Social and Behavioral Sciences” yielded only 2 papers in CNKI (both duplicate publications of *Experimental Science in Public Management Research: Intersection and Integration of Public Management and Cognitive Neuroscience*, published December 1, 2017 in *Series Publication* and December 31, 2017 in *China Conference*). Wanfang and Weipu contained 9 papers (2012–2017) and 10 papers (2010–2017) respectively, with no obvious duplicate publication. None of our 370 retraction statements in-

involved Liang Ying's papers. Applying the same estimation method as for Dong Peng suggests Wanfang and Weipu deleted approximately 116 and 115 papers respectively without publishing retraction statements. Table 2 summarizes misconduct in the Liang Ying case.

Table 2: Retraction Processing Misconduct in Large-Scale Retraction Cases (Unit: Papers)

[Table content would be preserved here with proper formatting]

Recommendations

As platforms for academic paper dissemination, Chinese journal databases should promptly identify and standardize processing of problematic papers to provide researchers with accurate, trustworthy, and authoritative literature. Scientifically standardized retraction processing that ensures traceability maximizes the deterrent and warning effects of retractions, holding significant value for strengthening academic misconduct governance and promoting research integrity. We offer the following recommendations from regulatory and database perspectives.

Since 2006, the General Offices of the CPC Central Committee and State Council, the Publicity Department, Ministry of Science and Technology, Ministry of Education, and other agencies have issued nearly 20 authoritative documents on academic misconduct governance and research integrity construction, including the *Key Points for National Scientific Ethics and Academic Style Education*, *Rules for Handling Research Integrity Cases*, *Measures for Handling Research Misconduct in National Science and Technology Programs*, *Notice on Severely Investigating and Punishing University Thesis Trading and Ghostwriting*, *Opinions of the Chinese Academy of Sciences on Strengthening Research Conduct Standards*, *Notice of the Ministry of Education on Seriously Handling Academic Misconduct in Higher Education Institutions*, *Five Prohibitions for Publishing Academic Papers*, *Measures for Preventing and Handling Academic Misconduct in Higher Education Institutions*, and *Guidance on Handling Authors Involved in Concentrated Retraction Incidents*. These detailed documents have played important roles in retracting historical problematic papers. However, careful review reveals that few provisions specifically address how Chinese-language academic journal databases should scientifically and standardize retractions.

Currently, only CNKI has implemented the *CNKI Network Publishing Document Status Change and Content Correction Standards (Trial)* (effective January 1, 2019) and its revised version (effective June 1, 2022). The trial version contained imperfections, and our investigation shows that CNKI did not fully implement it between January 1, 2019 and June 1, 2022. Since June 1, 2022, the revised version has also not been strictly enforced: for example, *Gemological Characteristics and Structure Study of South China Sea Tridacna* and *Aging Factors and Their Effects on Ivory Products* were completely deleted after retraction statement publication, and the retraction statement published in *Modern Teaching*

on September 10, 2023 yields empty results in CNKI's interface. Telephone inquiries confirmed that Wanfang and Weipu have no retraction standards and do not require retraction statements, allowing direct deletion upon author or editorial office request—creating significant convenience for individual paper removal. This chaotic retraction landscape across the three major databases urgently necessitates a nationally authoritative, universally applicable retraction standard document and strengthened regulatory oversight.

3.1.1 Formulate Retraction Standard Documents

The Ministry of Science and Technology, Ministry of Education, Publicity Department's Press and Publication Administration, Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, and State Administration for Market Regulation should jointly develop retraction standards to regulate database practices and enhance retraction deterrent effects. Building on CNKI's trial and revised standards, the document should include three components: First, standardized templates for retraction statements (title, body, signature), retraction applications, retraction criteria, and processing methods. Note that “retraction” here includes both withdrawal and deletion (all instances of “retraction” in this paper equate to “withdrawal” in potential future standards). Withdrawal criteria should cover papers with negligent academic errors not meeting correction standards, with processing requiring editorial submission of retraction statements and applications, retention of bibliographic information, and “withdrawn” markings in search results [14]. Deletion criteria should cover defamatory, rights-infringing, confidential, legally-enjoined, or illegal content, with processing requiring editorial applications for complete removal [14]. Second, standardized workflows: retraction (withdrawal/deletion) determination, editorial drafting and submission of statements and applications, and database standardized processing. Third, retraction statement publication: journals should establish dedicated retraction columns and publish statements on journal websites; databases should make retraction statements freely downloadable and create dedicated annual retraction columns on homepage interfaces.

3.1.2 Strengthen Database Retraction Supervision

Regulatory bodies should oversee the accuracy, scientific validity, research integrity, and academic ethics of database content, conducting random inspections of timely and standardized retraction processing. First, databases should be required to resolve existing retraction issues within deadlines: compile all published retraction statements across the three databases; contact editorial offices to obtain statements and applications for all problematic papers; supplement publication of required but missing retraction statements; standardize processing of all retracted papers—retaining only bibliographic information with “withdrawn” markings in search results to ensure traceability while preventing citation; and restore bibliographic information for completely deleted papers with “withdrawn” markings. Second, establish 常态化 supervision mechanisms:

implement annual retraction standard inspections requiring databases to submit self-inspection materials and annual work reports. Non-compliant databases should face penalties and ordered rectification; those with severe violations may be ordered to suspend operations for restructuring.

3.2 Databases Should Enhance Retraction Standardization Awareness and Establish Sound Systems

As academic dissemination platforms and recorders of scientific development, journal databases bear responsibility for providing accurate, trustworthy, and authoritative literature. They must objectively and comprehensively document published literature, scientifically and standardize processing erroneous or integrity-violating papers, eliminate researchers' doubts about literature credibility, and enable confident reading and citation. Therefore, databases must prioritize standardized processing of problematic papers, enhance retraction standardization awareness, and establish robust systems.

3.2.1 Improve Awareness of Standardized Retraction Database staff should thoroughly study retraction practices in authoritative foreign databases such as Retraction Watch, Web of Science, Science Direct, PubMed, and PubPeer, as well as domestic society and editorial office standards and processes described in Section 1.2. They should understand the current international and domestic standardized retraction environment, enhance restandardization awareness, and actively study national 部委 documents on misconduct governance and integrity construction. They must deeply understand recent retraction incidents, advocate for nationally applicable retraction standards, and actively cooperate with relevant stakeholders in the “academic misconduct governance” campaign.

3.2.2 Establish and Improve Retraction Standardization Systems Databases should establish dedicated retraction departments responsible for “receiving editorial retraction statements and applications—department head review—retracted paper processing” workflows. They must reject individual author retraction applications and strengthen internal retraction construction. Upon receiving editorial submissions, databases should immediately publish retraction statements and process retracted papers to alert readers, while maintaining paper records of statements and applications to ensure traceability. Additionally, databases should conduct duplicate checks before uploading journal electronic manuscripts to prevent duplicate publication and multiple submissions caused by timing gaps, reducing retraction workload at the source. For example, Dong Peng's paper *Discussion on Manufacturing Production Scheduling Systems in Globalization Context* was published in 9 journals, and *Research on Production Operations Planning and Control from Supply Chain Perspective* in 18 journals—duplicate checks before uploading could have completely prevented such multiple publication phenomena.

Furthermore, relevant stakeholders should strengthen retraction standardization training. After national authorities formulate authoritative retraction standards, major journal associations, societies, and research organizations should arrange expert lectures on retraction standards during editorial training, citing severe cases to enhance editors' understanding and 重视程度. Retraction standard content could even be incorporated into publishing professional qualification examination materials, syllabi, and *Journal Publication Management Regulations* as required examination content, raising new editors' awareness of duplicate checking, academic misconduct identification, reference verification, and retraction processing.

The three major Chinese academic journal databases exhibit widespread misconduct: failure to publish required retraction statements, direct deletion after statement publication, non-standard post-publication processing, direct deletion without statements, direct “retracted” marking without statements, and unprocessed papers retracted elsewhere. These practices require urgent attention from regulators and databases. Authorities must formulate retraction standards and strengthen supervision, while databases must enhance awareness and establish robust systems.

Limitations: This study excluded retraction statements titled “Apology Statement” with academic misconduct content but without explicit retraction demands, and statements with titles but no content, making our data slightly conservative. Future research will incorporate these categories to provide more comprehensive data for regulators and databases, standardize retraction practices, maximize retraction deterrent effects, and contribute to academic misconduct governance and research integrity construction.

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

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