Leading Scientists on Editorial Boards of Scientific Journals: A Survey and Analysis (Postprint)

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Abstract

Objective: To investigate the engagement of leading scientists as editorial board members of scientific journals, systematically examine the composition of editorial boards, analyze the significant roles these scientists play from their perspective, and objectively present the current state of scientist participation in journal development. Methods: Through online data collection on leading scientists, we analyzed the composition and scale of editorial boards of representative scientific journals in China, and utilized questionnaire surveys and interviews to assess the current status of scientist involvement in journal development. Results: The number and proportion of leading scientists serving on editorial boards correlate with journal quality; editorial board size correlates with journal impact. The roles performed by editorial board members are largely consistent with editors' expectations, though certain discrepancies exist. Conclusion: The presence of leading scientists in editorial boards correlates with scientific journal quality. Scientists' performance as editorial board members largely meets editorial expectations; however, their contributions require systematic and multidimensional evaluation.

Full Text

Research and Analysis of High-Level Scientists Serving as Editorial Board Members of Scientific Journals

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Abstract: [Purpose] This study investigates the participation of high-level scientists in the editorial boards of scientific journals, examines the composition of these editorial boards, and analyzes the significant roles these scientists play from their perspective, thereby objectively presenting the current state of scientist involvement in journal development. [Methods] We collected data on high-level scientists through web-based research, analyzed the composition and size of editorial boards of representative Chinese scientific journals, and explored the current situation of scientist participation in journal construction through questionnaires and interviews. [Findings] The number and proportion of high-level scientists serving as editorial board members correlate with journal quality, and editorial board size correlates with journal influence. The roles played by editorial board members are largely consistent with editorial expectations, though discrepancies exist in certain aspects. [Conclusions] The number and proportion of high-level scientists in editorial boards are correlated with journal quality. While scientists' contributions as editorial board members generally meet editorial expectations, their contributions require systematic and multidimensional evaluation.

Keywords: Scientific journals; High-level scientists; Editorial board

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Introduction

Scientific journals serve as a product of academic exchange, catering to scientists and the broader scientific community [1]. Most scientific journals establish editorial boards, typically composed of scientists with high academic achievements and reputation in relevant fields. The academic influence of editorial boards plays a crucial role in journal dissemination [2 3]. While research communities conduct academic exchanges through journals, some scientists become core forces in journal quality control by serving as editorial board members. The China Association for Science and Technology, the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Science and Technology jointly issued the "Opinions on Deepening Reform and Cultivating World-Class Scientific Journals," which calls for creating conditions to recruit high-level international editorial board members [4]. In the application for high-startup new journals under the "Excellence Action Plan for China's Scientific Journals," the academic level, international distribution, and influence of editorial boards are also important considerations, demonstrating that high-impact scientists serving as editorial board members significantly contribute to journal construction.

Domestic scholars have conducted various studies on journal editorial boards, including research on their functions and construction [3,5 6], analyses of edito-

rial boards in specific disciplinary journal clusters [7 10], theoretical explorations [11 12], and statistics on Chinese editorial board members in international journals [13]. Foreign studies on editorial boards primarily employ bibliometric analysis to examine board composition, geographical distribution, gender distribution, and influence differences [14 19]. However, domestic research on editorial boards has mostly analyzed how they can better fulfill their roles from the perspective of individual or small numbers of journals. Currently, there is no analysis based on large samples of editorial boards and the involvement of high-impact scientists, nor is there research from the scientist perspective. This study selects a certain number of scientific journal samples with disciplinary and influence representativeness to investigate and analyze the situation of high-level scientists serving on editorial boards, obtain data on editorial board size and composition, and examine the roles of editorial board members from both scientist and editor perspectives, aiming to provide insights for better promoting scientist participation in journal construction and advancing the high-quality development of China's scientific journals.

1. Research Design and Data Collection

1.1 Research Design This study focuses on two research questions: (1) the appointment status of high-level scientists in Chinese scientific journals, and (2) the role of high-level scientists in promoting journal development. For question (1), scientists serving on journals are categorized into decision-making and execution levels. Decision-level positions mainly include Editor-in-Chief, Co-Editor-in-Chief, Executive Editor-in-Chief, Deputy Editor-in-Chief, Field Editor, Editorial Board Director/Chair, and Young Editorial Board Director/Chair. Execution-level positions mainly include Editorial Board Member and Young Editorial Board Member. For question (2), the roles of high-level scientists in promoting journal development are divided into three dimensions: content construction, influence building, and resource acquisition. Content construction includes but is not limited to defining journal mission and positioning, formulating development plans, and organizing high-quality papers (special issues, commissioned articles, submissions). Influence building includes but is not limited to assembling editorial boards and promoting journals and key papers at academic conferences and on social media. Resource acquisition includes but is not limited to securing projects, providing financial support, and recommending outstanding scholars for editorial board membership. The research design is illustrated in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper].

1.2 Data Collection **1.2.1 High-Level Scientist Data.** Considering data availability, this study establishes a directory of high-level scientists primarily based on members of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and Chinese Academy of Engineering, as well as recipients of the National Science Fund for Distinguished Young Scholars and Excellent Young Scientists Fund from 2013–2020. The final directory includes 6,333 high-level scientists. It should be noted that the definition of high-level scientists in this study comprehensively considers the

recognition of honorary titles and funding programs and the accessibility of data. In reality, China's high-level scientist community extends far beyond this directory.

1.2.2 Journal Sample Data. To investigate the appointment status of high-level scientists in journals of varying quality, this study selected four categories of scientific journals as samples. Journals included in the "Excellence Action Plan for China's Scientific Journals" (hereinafter referred to as "excellent journals") are widely recognized as representing the highest level of scientific journals across disciplines in China. Therefore, excellent journals were selected as the sample source. Within excellent journals, since high-startup new journals are newly established and may differ from older journals in terms of scientist appointments and participation, high-startup new journals are treated as a separate tier (T1), while other excellent journals are classified as T2. Additionally, disciplinary fields of excellent journals were identified, and based on the comprehensive impact factor rankings in CNKI's "2021 Most Internationally Influential Chinese Academic Journals," three medium-impact and three low-impact journals were selected from each field.

The specific selection method was as follows: If a field had n journals, after ranking by comprehensive impact factor, journals at the median position and one position above and below were selected as medium-impact journals (T3), while the bottom three journals were selected as low-impact journals (T4). When n was odd, journals ranked at $(n+1)/2$, $[(n+1)/2]-1$, and $[(n+1)/2]+1$ were selected as T3. When n was even, journals ranked at $n/2$, $(n/2)-1$, and $(n/2)+1$ were selected as T3. Following this process and excluding journals without editorial board information, 585 journals were selected as samples, including 88 T1 journals, 256 T2 journals, 134 T3 journals, and 107 T4 journals, as shown in Table 1 .

1.2.3 Editorial Board Data. (1) **Editorial board data collection and processing.** The editorial board webpages of sample journals were queried individually, and web-based tools were used to obtain editorial board lists, including names, affiliations (if available), and email addresses (if available) of Editors-in-Chief, Deputy Editors, Editorial Board Members, and Young Editorial Board Members. For data unobtainable through web tools, print journals were consulted in libraries and manually entered. The collected Chinese and English editorial board data were deduplicated, and English name formats were standardized, yielding 47,829 valid editorial board records. The data were then standardized: 127 execution-level position titles and 103 decision-level position titles were collected, and non-standard titles were normalized. Honorary Editors-in-Chief, Editors-in-Chief/Co-Editors-in-Chief, Deputy/Field Editors-in-Chief, Executive Editors-in-Chief, and Assistant Editors-in-Chief were collectively designated as "Editors-in-Chief," while Senior Editorial Board Members, Editorial Board Members, and Young Editorial Board Members were collectively designated as "Editorial Board Members."

(2) **Questionnaires for scientists and editorial offices.** To understand

scientists' contributions to journals across different dimensions, a questionnaire for scientists was designed, covering basic information (professional title, journal position, honorary titles, etc.) and specific responsibilities in journals (defining journal mission and positioning, formulating development plans, organizing high-quality special issues and papers, participating in quality control, editorial board construction, and operations). The questionnaire also included an open-ended question: "What additional roles do you think high-level scientists can play for scientific journals?" To understand editorial expectations for scientist participation, a questionnaire for editorial offices was designed, covering editor information (affiliated journal), basic editorial board information (including proportion of high-level scientists), and the roles of Editors-in-Chief and Editorial Board Members in journal construction (organizing high-quality special issues and papers, reviewing manuscripts, assembling editorial boards, promotion, etc.). All questionnaires were distributed via WeChat to target scientists and editorial offices. The survey was conducted from September to November 2022, yielding 307 valid responses from scientists and 154 from editorial offices.

(3) **Interview data from editors-in-chief and editors.** To explore how scientists can effectively promote journal development, in-depth interviews were conducted with three Editors-in-Chief and six editorial office directors.

2. Data Analysis and Results

2.1 High-Level Scientists' Editorial Positions (1) Total numbers of editors-in-chief and editorial board members. Significant differences exist in the numbers of Editors-in-Chief and Editorial Board Members across journal tiers. The average numbers per journal for T1–T4 are 64, 109, 80, and 44, respectively. This indicates that T1 journals have fewer Editors-in-Chief and Editorial Board Members than T2 and T3 journals, likely because high-startup new journals are in their early stages of editorial board development. Additionally, many high-startup new journals belong to interdisciplinary or emerging fields that have not yet developed large research communities, resulting in smaller editorial boards compared to traditional or mature disciplines.

(2) Appointment status of high-level scientists. Matching the high-level scientist directory with editorial board data from 585 journals revealed that 1,146 high-level scientists serve as Editors-in-Chief and 3,273 as Editorial Board Members. Significant differences exist across journal tiers: the average numbers of high-level scientists in editorial teams decrease progressively from T1 to T4 (30, 24, 11, and 4 per journal, respectively). High-startup new journals typically adopt a "high-profile launch" strategy, recruiting high-level experts from inception. Regarding Editor-in-Chief appointments, 82.71% of T1, 80.31% of T2, 53.13% of T3, and 35.51% of T4 journals have high-level scientists in this role, with substantially higher proportions in the first two tiers. For Editorial

Board Members, the proportions are 22.76% in T1, 20.75% in T2, 8.89% in T3, and only 4.89% in T4 journals. In summary, T2 journals have the largest average editorial boards, likely related to disciplinary development and publication history. Editorial board size correlates with journal tier, with lower-tier journals having relatively smaller boards. T1 journals have the most non-Chinese Editorial Board Members (30 per journal), followed by T2 (28 per journal), far exceeding T3 and T4 journals (<3 per journal). The proportion of high-level scientists serving as Editors-in-Chief or Editorial Board Members correlates with journal tier across all categories.

2.2 Scientists' Contributions to Journal Development 2.2.1 Scientist Perspective. The survey received 307 responses from scientists, including 23 Editors-in-Chief (7.49%) and 284 Editorial Board Members (92.51%). Table 2 presents the results regarding scientists' roles in journals.

In content construction, over half (56.52%) of Editors-in-Chief define journal development directions and goals, 78.26% participate in peer review and quality control, and 60.87% write and organize high-quality papers and special issues. Editorial Board Members focus primarily on manuscript review, with 92.25% participating in review work and 58.80% writing and organizing high-quality special issues and papers. In influence building, 60.87% of Editors-in-Chief assemble editorial teams and 69.57% promote journals, while only 23.24% of Editorial Board Members participate in team building and 48.94% engage in promotion. In resource acquisition, 13.04% of Editors-in-Chief and 7.39% of Editorial Board Members work to improve journal operations.

Overall, Editors-in-Chief and Editorial Board Members play similar roles in content construction, significantly contributing to content control and high-quality paper organization. However, substantial differences emerge in influence building. In resource acquisition, both groups show low participation, though Editors-in-Chief participate at higher rates than Editorial Board Members. Notably, in response to the open-ended question, some scientists suggested additional roles in influence building, such as promoting journals at domestic and international conferences, writing commentaries, social media promotion, building academic communities, and disseminating journal achievements. Others suggested roles in resource acquisition, including organizing academic conferences and securing funding.

2.2.2 Editor Perspective. The survey received 154 responses from editorial offices, one per journal. The average proportion of high-level scientists on these editorial boards is 62.73%, higher than the average for T1 and T2 journals, ensuring the validity of responses regarding scientist participation. Editors' expectations for Editors-in-Chief and Editorial Board Members are shown in Table 3 .

In content construction, most editors believe Editors-in-Chief and Editorial Board Members should define journal positioning and strategic direction, evalu-

ate paper quality, and attract original innovative achievements, while only about one-third expect them to write and organize high-quality papers and special issues. In influence building, editors expect them to enhance internationalization and influence and strengthen academic exchange. In resource acquisition, 43.51% of editors believe they should secure resources from societies, associations, and publishing platforms, while less than 10% expect them to improve economic benefits.

Table 4 shows editors' perspectives on the actual roles played by Editors-in-Chief. 92.21% define development goals and directions—higher than editorial expectations. 66.23% participate in peer review and quality control. Their actual work in organizing and writing high-quality papers aligns relatively well with editorial expectations. In influence building, 66.23% build editorial teams and 55.19% promote journals. In resource acquisition, 17.53% work to improve operations—lower than the 43.51% editorial expectation.

Table 5 shows the actual roles of Editorial Board Members from the editor perspective. In content construction, 91.56% conduct peer review and quality control, and 68.83% write high-quality papers—both higher than the proportions for Editors-in-Chief, consistent with conventional role definitions and matching survey data showing Editorial Board Members handle 41.62% of annual reviews versus 31.73% by Editors-in-Chief. Notably, in influence building, 59.09% of Editorial Board Members participate in promotion—higher than the 55.19% of Editors-in-Chief. In resource acquisition, only 4.55% work to improve operations.

In summary, from the editor perspective, Editors-in-Chief primarily focus on defining development direction, reviewing manuscripts, and building editorial teams. There is a substantial gap between Editors-in-Chief self-expectations (56.52%) and editorial office perceptions (92.21%) regarding direction-setting, but expectations align regarding review and team-building. Editorial Board Members' primary role is manuscript review (91.56%), matching both editorial expectations and their actual high participation rate. In content construction, 58.80% of Editorial Board Members write and organize high-quality papers and special issues, slightly below the 68.83% editorial expectation. In influence building, since both Editors-in-Chief and Editorial Board Members are core academic community members with more influence than journal editors, editors hold high expectations: 75.32% expect them to enhance internationalization and influence, and 81.17% expect them to strengthen social impact and academic exchange, yet actual Editorial Board Member participation in promotion (59.09%) falls far short of these expectations.

In-depth interviews with six editorial office directors revealed that all six believe Editors-in-Chief should define overall direction and positioning, five believe they should organize excellent papers, four believe they should maintain and assemble editorial boards, three believe they should enhance influence, only two believe they should control paper quality, and one believes they should focus on editorial talent development. Regarding Editorial Board Member responsi-

bilities, all six directors believe they should control paper quality, six believe they should organize excellent papers, five believe they should participate in promotion and help introduce social resources, and only one believes they should assist Editors-in-Chief in formulating development plans. On journal management, five directors believe editorial boards and offices should collaborate, three believe offices should take the lead, and four believe scientists should take the lead. In interviews with three Editors-in-Chief, all agreed that "formulating development plans, defining mission and positioning, controlling overall quality, and enhancing influence" are key responsibilities. Two believed that capable Editors-in-Chief should help secure more social resources to create a favorable environment. Editors-in-Chief generally noted that foreign chief editors focus more on academic functions and manuscript review, while domestic chief editors need to collaborate more closely with editorial offices.

3. Conclusions and Recommendations

3.1 Conclusions Based on a detailed investigation of 585 journals across different influence levels, this study systematically examined the appointment status of high-level scientists and surveyed their roles in journal development through questionnaires and interviews, reaching the following conclusions:

(1) Editorial board size correlates with journal academic influence. The survey found an average editorial board size of 81 members per journal, highly consistent with Nishikawa-Pacher et al. [20] (81 members per journal across 7,352 journals and 594,580 editorial board members). However, board size varies significantly across journals, likely related to discipline and publication history.

(2) The proportion of high-level scientists on editorial boards correlates with journal academic influence. Generally, higher-quality journals have higher proportions of high-level scientist editorial board members. High-startup new journals have the highest proportion, likely because new journals heavily rely on high-level scientists to establish initial academic reputation.

(3) Regarding scientists' contributions to journal development, the most highly engaged activity for both Editors-in-Chief and Editorial Board Members is peer review and quality control.

(4) Over three-quarters of editors expect Editorial Board Members to play important roles in expanding academic and social influence—expectations higher than actual participation and scientist perceptions.

(5) Both editors and scientists show insufficient attention to resource acquisition, possibly related to the operational nature of Chinese journals. However, nearly half of editorial office directors interviewed expect scientists to introduce social resources, and some Editors-in-Chief expressed willingness to secure more resources when possible, indicating that obtaining external support represents an important lever for scientist support of

journal development.

3.2 Issues and Recommendations The development of China's scientific journals is a public welfare undertaking. Building world-class journals requires not only national policy support but also deep participation from the scientific community [21], with implementing "scientist-run journals" being a key element. Although this survey shows that China's high-level scientists participate in journal operation across multiple dimensions, several issues exist.

(1) **Current journal evaluation systems lack consideration for scientist contributions.** Most evaluation systems focus on publishing institutions rather than directly recognizing the contributions of participating high-level scientists. While some journals have "excellent editorial board member" awards, their influence is limited. Although the "Excellence Action Plan for China's Scientific Journals" includes an outstanding Editor-in-Chief selection program, the number of selected journals is very limited relative to the total number of scientific journals, resulting in low coverage. Since scientists mostly serve part-time in journal work, existing policies and mechanisms lack long-term incentives for their contributions to journal development.

(2) **Scientists typically fulfill responsibilities according to internally established editorial board charters, which vary greatly across journals.** Scientists and editors have different perceptions regarding enhancing journal influence, indicating a lack of consensus on respective responsibilities.

To better encourage scientists to serve on editorial boards and deeply participate in China's scientific journal construction, we propose the following recommendations:

(1) **Promote the construction of editorial board databases.** During this research, we found that although editorial boards have become a hot topic in publishing and bibliometrics, with researchers analyzing various characteristics of scientists serving on boards, structured editorial board data are lacking. Journals primarily consider scientists' academic influence when assembling boards without reference databases. While foreign researchers have established the open editorial board database Open Editors [22], China could similarly organize the construction of a Chinese or China-specific scientific journal editorial board database by journal management and research institutions, providing a solid data foundation for high-quality journal development.

(2) **Establish a systematic editorial board monitoring system.** Building on the indicator system designed by Yan et al. [23] and our findings, scientists' contributions to journal development could be evaluated across multiple dimensions, such as journal positioning and content/quality construction, journal promotion and influence enhancement, and academic

exchange and external cooperation. Based on this, multiple secondary and tertiary indicators could be designed to form a qualitative contribution evaluation system. By constructing a monitoring system with standardized data collection methods and descriptive frameworks, specific indicators can be provided for tracking and monitoring high-level scientist participation in journal work.

(3) **Incorporate scientist editorial board service into talent evaluation systems.** Since scientists mostly serve part-time in journal work, which requires substantial time and effort, editorial board service indicators could be incorporated into talent evaluation systems, particularly for young and mid-career scientists, to better incentivize their participation in China's scientific journal construction.

4. Limitations and Future Directions

Through large-scale sampling and analysis of scientist appointments, this study yielded substantial statistical results. However, due to the large number of scientific journals in China, our findings cannot represent the entire landscape, and some disciplinary journals may not be covered. Questionnaire and interview results also represent only a subset of scientists and editors, inevitably deviating from the overall situation. Moreover, current findings remain at the textual analysis level, requiring further exploration of how to effectively promote high-level scientist participation in journal work. Nevertheless, this large-sample editorial board analysis establishes the relationship between high-level scientist appointments and journal influence, providing a solid foundation for further research on scientist-journal relationships. Future work could involve constructing a scientific journal editorial board data platform or database to more conveniently analyze composition, diversity, and distribution of editorial boards, provide data references for journal board assembly, and offer guidance for researchers' academic service.

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Author Contributions

LI Yuan: Conceptualized the basic framework, designed the research plan and approach, conducted literature review, analyzed data, and wrote the manuscript.
LIU Rong: Conceptualized the basic framework, designed the research plan and objectives, and revised the manuscript.
LIU Fenghong: Designed the journal selection scheme, selected sample journals, collected and processed data, cleaned and analyzed results, and wrote and revised the manuscript.
SHEN Zhesi: Collected data and participated in research plan formulation.
PENG Xijun: Participated in paper framework design and conclusion writing, and revised the manuscript.
DU Xingye: Participated in questionnaire design and distribution, and revised the manuscript.
DONG Wenjie: Designed questionnaires and analyzed data results.
LIANG Yongxia: Designed and distributed questionnaires and participated in results analysis.
CHU Jingli: Developed the basic paper framework, designed the research plan, and guided manuscript revision.

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