

# Learner, Worker, and Educator: Perspectives of an Editor in China

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To edit well in Chinese is not easy, and to edit well in English is even more difficult. In this article, I describe my experiences as an editor at two academic journals: the *Journal of the Fourth Military Medical University*, published in Chinese, and the *Journal of Medical Colleges of the PLA (People's Liberation Army)*, published in English. I also suggest that to be a good editor, one must be a good learner, a good worker, and a good educator.

### My Editorial Experience

Before I became an English editor, I was a medical doctor for many years and an associate professor of microbiology at the Fourth Military Medical University for several more. Those experiences gave me a good professional foundation to be an editor. For example, I enjoy English and learned much of the language as a guest researcher in Europe for more than 3 years. I also have attended nearly 20 international conferences and have hosted foreign experts at my university many times.

In 1995, I was invited by the editorial office of the *Journal of the Fourth Military Medical University* to do some editorial work, and I became a half-time editor. In 1999, I was formally offered a senior editorial position. Since then, I have become a full-time editor and have had very little time for clinical work. I now edit about 100 English papers a year for my two journals, in addition to some Chinese papers and other work.<sup>1</sup>

The *Journal of the Fourth Military Medical University* is an award-winning semi-monthly journal, appraised by the Chinese government as an Excellent Journal of Science and Technology. The journal is a comprehensive medical periodical read

primarily by medical doctors and researchers. It is indexed in many databases, including the Index of Chinese Periodicals, Chemical Abstracts (CA), Biological Abstracts (BA), and Cambridge Scientific Abstracts. Emphasizing the importance of integrating theoretical research with clinical applications, the journal covers a variety of subjects, including basic medical science; general clinical medicine; military medicine; aviation and aerospace medicine; ear, nose, and throat medicine; traditional Chinese medicine; and biomedical engineering. This journal, which is peer reviewed, is published in Chinese. The issues run 96 pages each and contain original articles, brief communications, and rapid reports.

Recently, to expand the reach of the journal, we have begun to publish both original research articles and rapid research reports in English. In addition to my other duties, I am responsible for editing the English manuscripts and helping some writers to translate their papers into English.

I also am the executive editor of the *Journal of Medical Colleges of the PLA*, a peer-reviewed journal sponsored and published jointly by the four military medical universities in China. The journal is published in English. It contains mainly original research articles on basic medical science, clinical medicine, oncology, pharmacy, and preventive medicine.

This journal began as a quarterly in 1985. In 2003, it was published bimonthly, with each issue running 72 pages. It is indexed in several international databases, such as CA and the Russian Abstract Journal (AJ). The journal's editorial board consists of well-known scientists and professors, and the editorial-review system is very strict. Submitted papers must be recommended by a specialist, peer reviewed separately by reviewers at a university other than that of the author, and then discussed by the editorial board. I am on the editorial board for peer reviewing and have taken

turns as the executive editor, who edits and compiles each issue. Each year, an editor at one sponsoring university serves as the executive editor. For special reasons, I was the executive editor in both 2002 and 2003. During my term, the journal started to be published bimonthly.<sup>2,3</sup>

### A Good Learner

To be a good editor, one must be a good learner. First, new editors must learn editorial skills and information about scientific communication, principles of writing, and the publishing process—topics quite different from those in medicine.

To edit English papers well, an English editor in China must learn how to understand, speak, read, and write English. In China, an editorial office is not always a good place to learn those skills. In my experience, mastering English requires a love of the language. One must set aside time every day to learn, to read, and to practice, always focusing on improving, without fear of making mistakes. English editors in China who work only with print may forget how to speak with foreigners and gradually become deaf-mutes in English. I do not think that losing the ability to speak English is good for journal development, so nearly every day I listen to English radio broadcasts and try to use any opportunities to improve my English.<sup>1</sup>

### A Good Worker

Work is one kind of training, one kind of practicing, one kind of learning. To be a good editor, one must be a good worker. Every day, editors receive and select manuscripts, contact peer reviewers about them, guide authors in checking and revising them, and decide whether to publish or reject them. Those procedures should be approached systematically and scientifically.<sup>3</sup> For example, in editing English papers, I found that many authors ignore the importance of references. Some references are very old, some reference lists

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do not correspond to the citations in the article, some issue and volume numbers are wrong, and some references could not possibly have been read by the author! So I made a rule for the English-language papers for both journals: When the author submits a manuscript, he or she should also submit copies of the main references. For an editor, reading the references has several advantages: I can help the author to check the paper and keep its quality high, I can understand the development in different fields and rather easily correct mistakes, and I can learn and develop the vocabulary and gradually master terms and expressions in different disciplines.

To keep journal quality high, editors also work to promote consistency. In China, there are clear publishing rules and standards for Chinese academic periodicals but not for English periodicals. When I was asked to create a complete style guide for the *Journal of Medical Colleges of the PLA*, I discussed the topic with colleagues and then recommended following the Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals ([www.icmje.org](http://www.icmje.org)). I also recommended rules for solving some special problems, such as expressing Chinese authors' names.<sup>2</sup>

Editors must also work to publicize their journals. The editor should not only sit in the office but interact with peer reviewers, authors, and readers. Since 1999, another editor and I have traveled to a distant hospital every week on behalf of the editorial office. We give doctors and nurses on-the-spot guidance, exchange ideas face to face, collect manuscripts, edit papers, and organize special issues.<sup>4</sup> Those activities have greatly improved the journal's popularity.<sup>5</sup>

### A Good Educator

An editor should not forget the teaching functions of the job. An academic journal's English editor, I think, should improve the journal by teaching two subjects: how to write medical papers and how to use English to write medical papers. Doing research is different from writing, and both require training.

In order to work well, I asked the

president of the Fourth Military Medical University to help me organize a training course taught entirely in English. The president agreed. With his help, I gave a course titled Medical Information Acquisition and International Exchange. The course is sponsored by the training department of the university. It is held at the university, and it is taken by upper-level medical students, graduate students, and some lovers of English learning.

The main purposes of the course are to popularize English and to teach students important communication skills, such as how to use medical information and how to write English papers. I started to give this course in 1996, and I have now given it 14 times. The classes include about 30 to 160 students and last about 15 to 30 academic hours. In the course, I introduce the definition of information, ways to improve one's English, the value of attending an international conference, the customs and language of social interactions with Western physicians, and especially how to write and how to submit English medical papers. I was asked to give this course by different deans and hospitals of the Fourth Military Medical University and outside this university. The course has received very good evaluations from the medical students and other attendees.<sup>6</sup>

To promote better medical writing, my colleagues in the editorial office and I visit different departments of this university and use the opportunity to run study classes. For example, we show staff members how to write an English abstract, and we have English special activities to help them solve problems in writing.<sup>4</sup>

We have invited many foreign experts to our university. Some introduced their research and writing. Recently, we invited Tom Lang, past president of the Council of Science Editors and a fellow of the American Medical Writers Association, to my university. He visited us in April 2002 and lectured twice about writing and submitting a biomedical paper.<sup>7</sup> In September 2002, Miriam Balaban, the founder and president of the International Federation of Scientific Editors (IFSE), visited my

university and gave lectures to editors and authors.<sup>8</sup> Such international academic activities are educational and improve the journal's development.

In conclusion, a good editor of an academic journal in China, especially a good English editor, should have a good knowledge background and should be a good learner, a good worker, and a good educator. In my experience, the most important of the three aspects is to learn, to practice. Recently, I was invited to be an editor and vice director of the Asian editorial office of the *Journal of Tumor Marker Oncology*, the official journal of the International Academy of Tumor Marker Oncology. The invitation seems to indicate that my learning and practicing have helped me to become an editor at an international level.

**Acknowledgments:** I thank Tom Lang for his kind comments and for reviewing the manuscript. I also thank Jennifer Ann Hutt for editorial suggestions. 

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