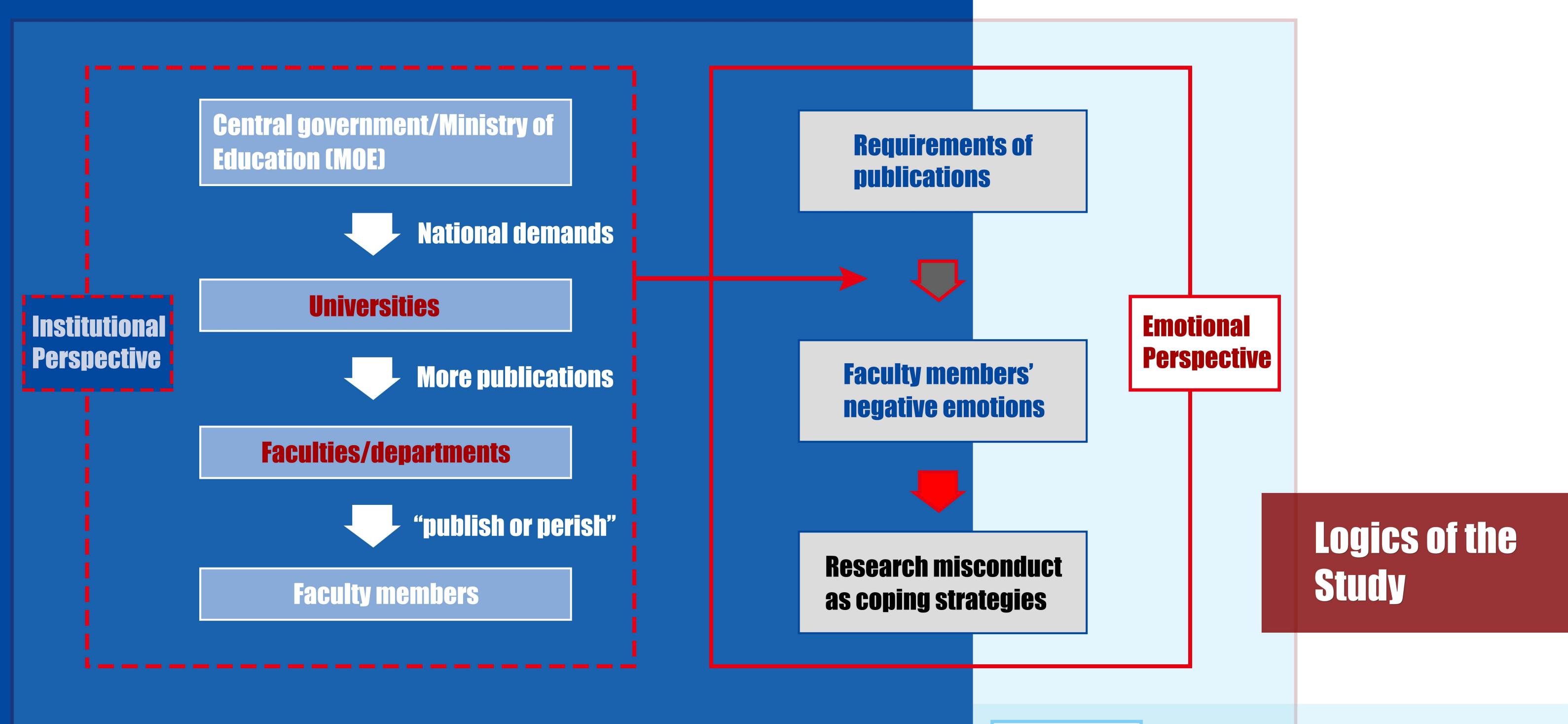# Research Misconduct in China: An Analysis from Institutional and Emotional Perspectives

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Logics of the Study

Central government/Ministry of Education (MOE)

National demands

Universities

More publications

Faculties/departments

"publish or perish"

Faculty members

Institutional Perspective

Requirements of publications

Faculty members' negative emotions

Research misconduct as coping strategies

Emotional Perspective

Introduction

Academic integrity issues have become severe in China; however, most existing literature on the causes of these issues focuses solely on personal moralities or academic institutional supervision. Based on personal experiences, research should also examine institutional and emotional factors. Specifically, this study concentrates on the institutional setting of Chinese universities, which determines policy-making and implementation in conjunction with the national demand for academic development. Furthermore, I argue that the central aspect of existing policies, the Chinese version of "publish or perish" (i.e., acquiring more publications in world-recognized academic journals), is a primary cause of mental unwellness among faculty members. Pressures from universities' aggressive policies motivate faculty members to engage in research misconduct as coping strategies to negative emotions. In short, I argue that individual issues and institutional shortcomings (e.g., overemphasizing publications) contribute to research misconduct in the Chinese context.

To support my argument, I draw upon the following sociological and criminological concepts and theories: (1) Weberian and Chinese bureaucracy, (2) sociology of emotions, and (3) criminology of emotions. The sociological perspective on bureaucracy helps explain the fundamental governance logic of Chinese public and governmental organizations, specifically regarding how the "publish or perish" set of policies is implemented within Chinese universities. The sociological theories on emotions suggest that human emotions can be shaped socially. Furthermore, the criminology of emotions elaborates on the "strain-negative emotions-crime/delinquency link," which is also applicable in analyzing academic integrity issues.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing approximately 30 in-depth interviews to collect data. The main participants are faculty members and research postgraduate students (primarily PhD candidates) from the natural sciences faculties of three elite universities (ranked from top to bottom) in China. Some scholars hold administrative roles, such as faculty deans and department heads. I initially sought interviews with social science researchers but encountered reluctance from many potential interviewees, possibly due to the sensitivity of their research topics and their preference for collaborating within China. Consequently, I shifted my focus to natural science scholars who were more willing to participate in interviews. Leveraging my connections, I interviewed these individuals, who then introduced me to additional participants for further interviews.

I conducted online interviews from 2021 to 2022 to adhere to China's COVID-19 public health regulations. Each interviewee was provided with an individual link and consent form for the meeting, and each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. In addition to formal interviews, I conducted informal interviews with some MPhil and PhD students who actively participated in their supervisors' research projects, assisting with tasks such as data collection, analysis, and occasionally article writing. These students willingly shared numerous details about research misconduct among faculty members. I carefully designed interview questions to align with each interviewee's background to facilitate the open sharing of viewpoints. Following the interviews, I contacted the participants and invited them to review the interview transcripts. Additionally, I posed follow-up questions when deemed necessary.

Apart from interviews, I reviewed published documents from the three universities, including public announcements, policy documents on tenure and promotion, and news articles on university websites. Fortunately, some senior staff members in administrative positions shared internal documents containing information on research conduct regulations and documented cases of misconduct, with identifiable information removed.

Findings

The current findings are illustrated in the figure below. Chinese universities are crucial in promoting national academic advancement and establishing world-class academic institutions. However, they lack clear guidelines for achieving these goals. Drawing on past experiences, university leaders focus on increasing the number of publications in renowned academic journals, a key factor considered by major university rankings (e.g., THE, QS). Subsequently, these university-level decisions are passed on to faculty and departments for implementation.

To ensure individual faculty members align with the development direction set by the universities, faculty, and department leaders, reinforce university-level policies, and incorporate publication numbers into faculty members' academic performance assessments. This creates a Chinese version of "publish or perish," wherein scholars who fail to meet university and faculty/department requirements (typically less stringent than the latter) must leave their positions once their contracts expire. The Chinese version differs from its Western counterpart in that Chinese university requirements continually emphasize journal rankings, such as Tier 1 and 2 within SCI journals for natural sciences.

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