

Abstract

This paper analyzes an academic scandal in China involving a doctoral candidate and her supervisor that ignited public debate over academic integrity, abuses of power, and gender bias in higher education. The controversy, triggered by a viral video of a thesis defense, quickly expanded into allegations of favoritism, unethical relationships, and unequal access to academic resources, exposing systemic issues within academia's "publish or perish" culture. Drawing on media reports, institutional statements, and online discourse, this paper examines how personal relationships and institutional priorities intersect to shape academic careers while eroding public trust. It argues that such scandals often weaponize morality and reputation, obscure structural inequities, and reinforce gendered stereotypes in academia. The paper concludes by calling for reforms to academic evaluation systems, stronger integrity safeguards, and institutional accountability to ensure fairness, transparency, and gender equity in higher education.

Keywords: academic integrity, academic profession, China, gender equality, students, universities

Background

In the summer of 2023, a video of a woman doctoral candidate (hereinafter referred to as Susan) from one of the top Chinese universities (hereinafter referred to as H University), a 985 university (for more on national excellence initiatives in China, see Yang, 2023, and more broadly Yudkevich et al., 2023) in southern China, defending her doctoral thesis was posted online. Upon release, it was rapidly reposted across multiple platforms, including Douyin(抖音 , TikTok China), Zhihu(知乎), Tencent News (腾讯), Sihu Online (搜狐) and The Paper (澎湃新闻), where related coverage and shares appeared. In the video, one of the reviewers pointed out numerous errors in Susan's thesis and harshly criticized her low-quality research work. The reviewer made several points but emphasized two. First, that despite having published a significant number of high-impact academic papers as a PhD candidate, Susan's doctoral thesis was poorly written. Second, the reviewer warned Susan, along with the young researchers in attendance, that doctoral dissertations outlive scholars and that scholars should cherish their academic reputations and engage in rigorous scholarly work. Susan's defense was already somewhat unusual. Although open academic defenses have been a common practice in Chinese universities for many years, a large number of people seem to have attended Susan's defense as observers. Shortly after the defense concluded, the video, likely filmed by a student attending as an observer, was uploaded and shared, sparking public debate.

Though Susan ultimately passed her defense with revisions, responses to the video made Susan herself the topic of public discussion. Comments on the video accused Susan of having started an affair with her married supervisor (hereinafter referred to as Professor G) shortly after she was enrolled in the PhD program. She was also accused of using this improper relationship to obtain academic resources far beyond her capabilities. According to posts made on social media platforms by fellow students, Professor G had gone to great lengths to help Susan publish papers. He not only assigned her projects that more easily produced results but also repeatedly credited her as a co-first author on work done by other students and highlighted her work in external promotions of the laboratory above other students. During her years in the PhD program, Susan had managed to obtain nineteen papers published in first-tier SCI journals, five as the first author and fourteen as the co-first author (she was even able to obtain a co-first author in *Nature*). For most doctoral students, this would be a remarkable, even astonishing achievement, virtually unattainable even for most junior faculty members at the beginning of their academic careers. Many full-time doctoral students publish two to five papers during their studies at leading Chinese research universities (a standard four-year

program). Only a small cohort of top-performing candidates—those supported by strong research teams and institutional resources—achieve the exceptional benchmark of six to ten SCI publications. Prior to Susan’s defense, Professor G had resigned from H University for a tenure track job as a head researcher at another 985 university (hereinafter referred to as S University) in southwestern China. According to a special homepage, which keeps track of academic job announcements, Susan had been awarded a position as a Distinguished Associate Researcher (equal to an associate professor title/position on the tenure track) at S University before she had even defended her dissertation. While online commenters have referred to Susan, they have also targeted Professor G, accusing him of having a poor character, bad temper, and tendency to hold grudges. According to comments, he frequently ignored or suppressed students, especially after he became romantically involved with Susan, and diverted academic resources to her. For example, comments accused him of taking away an international exchange opportunity originally intended for another senior student and giving it to Susan.

Follow-up Developments

Chinese universities generally prohibit romantic or sexual relationships between supervisors and their direct supervisees, framing them as conflicts of interest. However, these rules often rely on broad moral language and lack clear operational criteria, making enforcement difficult in practice. Once the video was released, it sparked widespread public concern and discussions about educational equity. Faced with public pressure, H University issued a statement that did not address any of the issues raised by the video but confirmed that Professor G had resigned in February 2023 (the video was uploaded in June 2023). S University also released a statement emphasizing its zero-tolerance policy towards ethical misconduct among faculty but did not disclose whether Susan had ultimately joined the university. According to an investigation by *China News Weekly*, a representative from H University implied that the matter was no longer the university’s concern, as Professor G was now an employee of S University. In that same article, a representative from S University responded that academic misconduct required a determination by the university’s Academic Committee. As Susan had not officially joined the faculty yet, she was not under the university’s jurisdiction. If, once she was hired, she was suspected of academic misconduct, at that point the university would issue a statement and take action. Over the next few months, these news reports and online discussions gradually faded from public view, with no further official statements regarding any subsequent developments involving Professor G and Susan. Susan and Professor G have never made any statements on the matter.

Due to the complexity of the case, making a fair and objective judgment is difficult and probably unnecessary: Is this the case of a male professor exploiting his position of power to sexually harass a female student (i.e., sextortion, Cvetanoska, 2024)? Or the case of a female student using her age and appearance to gain benefits from a male professor? Is this about workplace relationships or something completely different or an illustrative case through which broader structural dynamics in academia are publicly negotiated? That this became a social media controversy reflects how much frustration and mistrust H University’s students felt towards Professor G and Susan, as well as the overall public’s doubts about academic integrity issues in higher education institutions.

The relationship between these two individuals became a hot topic of discussion not only because some insiders exposed their “immoral conduct and destruction of marriage” online, but also because the affair sparked widespread public concern over academic misconduct and conflict. In recent years, two metaphorical terms have emerged in China’s academic community: Academic King Zhou (学

术纣王) (academic tyrant) and Academic Daji (学术妲己) (academic seductress). Academic King Zhou originates from King Zhou of Shang (商纣王), the last ruler of the Shang dynasty in Chinese history, notorious for his tyranny and extravagance. In academia, this term typically refers to scholars or leaders who are morally corrupt, abuse their authority, manipulate academic resources, and pursue personal gain. Academic Daji also originates from Chinese history, referring to Daji (妲己), a concubine of the Zhou royal court, often portrayed as a cunning and treacherous figure who brought ruin to the nation and its people. Drawing a parallel with Western literature, Daji can be likened to the Sirens of Greek mythology—luring powerful figures to ruin with fatal allure. In academia, this term typically denotes female scholars who leverage personal charm or gender advantages to engage in improper academic dealings or establish illicit relationships (for further discussion of gender and bias in Chinese academia, see Horta & Tang, 2023a and 2023b; Tang & Horta, 2021 and 2024). Both news media and digital platforms began to refer to Professor G and Susan by these terms.

Core Issues Triggered by This Incident

Similar concerns about preferential authorship and abuse of academic authority have emerged in other high-profile cases. For example, in May 2025, Chinese media reported that a vice dean of a graduate school at a top research university in Southwest China improperly listed his undergraduate daughter as a co-author on 14 SCI papers and three invention patents—some filed while she was still in junior high school. Following an official investigation, the university dismissed the administrator, imposed Party disciplinary sanctions, and revoked the student's honors and scholarships. In recent years, although national and institutional ethics policies exist (MOE, China, 2014; 2018a, 2018b), they offer limited guidance on indirect conflicts of interest, such as preferential authorship or post-graduation employment links. As enforcement is largely discretionary, grey areas emerge in which behavior may violate ethical norms without triggering formal accountability. In this context, the potential for improper dependencies and conflicts of interest in academic publishing stems from two main factors (see also Lee, 2008, on supervisory dependency and academic evaluation pressures, and Wang et al., 2025, for a China-specific analysis). First, in the Chinese higher education system, as well as in many other countries/regions, major academic milestones such as degree applications, faculty positions, tenure reviews, and promotions all require the publication of academic papers ("publish or perish"). Academic journals are arranged into tiers, and the expectation that scholars publish regularly in top tier journals has increased. This means that a large number of scholars are attempting to publish in the same small number of journals, making their odds of being published smaller. Second, since journals are closely tied to the career prospects of researchers, they may seek to enhance their impact factors and upgrade their rankings. Some journals may also use their high impact factors to gain greater attention and favor from researchers. Under these circumstances, the difficulty of publishing papers for academic mentors and students is fundamentally different. This difficulty does not solely depend on the quality of the article but is also influenced by the combined effects of various factors.

In 2020, the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) and the Ministry of Finance (MOF) of China issued the "*Several Measures (Trial) on Eliminating the Unhealthy Trend of 'Paper-Centric' Evaluation in Science and Technology*" (《关于破除科技评价中的“唯论文”不良导向的若干措施

(试行)》(MOST, China, 2020). This measure was significant not because it eliminated the value of the papers themselves, but because it broke the monopoly of academic publications as an overwhelming metric for evaluating scholars' research capabilities, thereby eliminating potential self-serving interests surrounding papers. In an ideal and healthy academic ecosystem, academic resources should flow freely, and everyone should have the opportunity to excel. However, in reality, the politicization of academia often results in only those who engage in power transactions gaining opportunities.

It is precisely for this reason that the issues of Academic Daji and Academic King Zhou have drawn attention, as they highlight academic paths driven by transactions and monetization. For the vast majority of ordinary researchers, the reality is that “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush”. It would undoubtedly be unfair if Academic Daji were able to obtain with ease resources that other researchers, despite their relentless efforts and daily toil, struggled to attain.

Impact and Reflections

The case of Professor G and Susan also exposes how morality and reputation can be weaponized in ways that harm individuals, institutions, and academia as a whole (Eaton, 2025).

At the *individual level*, the scandal surrounding Susan and Professor G turned into a public spectacle, with online discourse branding them as immoral villains before any official investigation had concluded. While Professor G's former spouse and her family endured personal and social devastation, Professor G's academic career largely remained unaffected. More significantly, it is likely that (assuming she completes her revisions, submits her dissertations, and receives her degree) Susan will continue in academia and public attention will dissipate.

At the *institutional level*, this case reveals significant gaps in conflict-of-interest regulation and enforcement. Rather than addressing the underlying misconduct, the universities involved prioritized reputational protection. H University distanced itself following Professor G's resignation, while S University minimized its responsibility by invoking internal procedures. As a result, accountability remained diffuse, raising broader questions about who bears responsibility when academic integrity is compromised.

At the *academic level*, such scandals erode public trust in higher education. When allegations of favoritism, power abuse, and conflicts of interest emerge without clear resolutions, the perception grows that academia rewards connections over merit. Without robust mechanisms for accountability and transparency, universities risk a further decline in credibility.

Finally, in *terms of gender*, cases like this often exacerbate the glass ceiling for women in academia. When female scholars achieve rapid success, they may be subjected to suspicion or accused of relying on personal relationships rather than merit. This not only undermines the achievements of accomplished women but also discourages aspiring female academics, reinforcing structural barriers in a field already marked by gender inequality.

Addressing problems of this kind requires more than moral judgment or reputational management. When morality is selectively mobilized as a weapon—amplified through public shaming rather than institutional due process—it obscures structural failures and displaces accountability onto individuals. Clearer and enforceable conflict-of-interest regulations, independent oversight mechanisms, and reduced reliance on “publish or perish” metrics are therefore essential to restoring trust in academic

evaluation.

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