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# The Language of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

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Distinctions in English  
and Mandarin  
Discussions of  
Accreditation and  
Academic Standards

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Shuyi Deng

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# **The Language of Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Distinctions in English and Mandarin Discussions of Accreditation and Academic Standards**

By Shuyi Deng<sup>1</sup>

At the core of any discussion of quality in higher education is an understanding of what the terms used actually mean. In the case of international discussions of quality in higher education, there may be different meanings or understanding of the same word. This paper explores three different aspects of language used to capture the concept of quality in higher education: “Quality Assurance” vs. “Accreditation”; “Standard” vs. “Indicator”; and “Assessment” vs “Evaluation”. After comparing the differences between terms in English, each section of the paper then examines the effect on the meaning of translating these terms into Chinese, including some “emerging meanings” for these terms in Chinese higher education. The paper concludes that precision in language use in international higher education discussions is critical, and that particularly in the case of accreditation terminology, could be the key to better future global cooperation in quality assurance.

## **Language Matters**

Any efficient international discussion of quality assurance in higher education relies on a shared understanding of terms. Because of the different historical, philosophical, political, and social factors in higher education, the same word might have different meanings and implications in different countries. After a dramatic quantitative expansion of higher education enrollment in China, there has been a shift to quality improvement and efforts to establish an officially recognized quality assurance system have also come into being (Shi, 2008). In such efforts, Chinese scholars turn their attentions to quality assurance in US higher education and try to draw lessons for the Chinese case (Yang and Fei, 2008; Zhang, 2007; Xu and Qian, 2006; Chen and Hou, 2008). However, none of these literatures discusses the subtle difference in the meanings and implications of some key terms when they are used in English and translated into Chinese. The following sections of this paper compare three pairs of key terms of quality assurance in higher education – “Quality Assurance” (“质量保障”[ZhiLiangBaoZhang]) V.S.

“Accreditation” (“认证”[RenZheng]), “Standards” (“标准”[BiaoZhun]) V.S. “Indicators” (“指标”[ZhiBiao]), and “Assessment” (“评估”[PingGu]) V.S. “Evaluation” (“评估”[PingGu]) -- and their meanings and implications when used in English and Chinese.

## **Quality Assurance vs Accreditation**

Accreditation is one of the approaches of quality assurance. Quality assurance in higher education generally refers to the policies, actions and procedures necessary to ensure that the quality of education is being maintained and enhanced. Discussions in English literature stress two focuses of quality assurance in higher education – improvement and accountability. Quality assurance is an ongoing,

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continuous process, which includes checking that the quality control mechanisms, processes, techniques, and activities are in place, are being used and are effective (CHEA, 2001). Therefore, quality assurance in higher education embraces a strong commitment to quality improvement and enhancement rather than measurement (CHEA, 2015). On the other hand, quality assurance derives from strong ethos of institutional autonomy and accountability. The process of quality assurance provides information and judgment to relevant stakeholders and the public through an agreed upon and consistent procedure and well-established criteria (Vlascenu, Grunberg, and Parlea, 2007).

Accreditation generally denotes the process of external quality review used in higher education to formally recognize an institution or a program as having met certain pre-determined minimal criteria. In the United States accreditation is a voluntary process to ensure that education providers meet, and maintain, minimum standards of quality and integrity regarding academics, administration, and related services (US Department of Education). It usually includes self-study and external peer review to determine whether an institution or a program has met or exceeded the published standards of its accrediting association and is achieving its mission and stated purpose (CHEA, 2001). The following factors are essential for accreditation in the US higher education:

- Accreditation is carried out by an independent body external to the institution or the program;
- Accreditation is a voluntary participation based on academic self-governance;
- The results of accreditation is usually the awarding of status (a Yes/No decision), and such status may have implications for the institution/program itself, and/or its students and graduates, and/or its management and services;
- Accreditation is based on agreed upon standards, which usually define the field/profession of an institution/a program (will discuss in detail in the next section);
- The result of accreditation is of time-limited validity, and thus requires reaccreditation;
- Accreditation status requires monitoring and maintenance, therefore regular evaluation, from accredited institutions/programs;
- The requirements of reaccreditation and maintenance together stimulate a continuous rising of quality standards among higher education institutions.

So accreditation serves as a specific means of quality assurance in higher education. Other means of quality assurance include government-led evaluation, which is not necessarily based on voluntary participation, programs' internal evaluation, which is not necessarily conducted by an external agency, and exit surveys, which do not necessarily result in a Yes/No decision, and so forth. Although in practice some organizations such as U.S. Network for Education Information and UNESCO don't even distinguish "Quality Assurance" and "Accreditation" and use a combined term "quality assurance and accreditation" on their websites or documents, most English literature regard quality assurance as an "all-embracing term" (Vlasceanu, Grunberg, and Parlea, 2007) or a "generic term" necessary to cover various terms of accreditation, audit, and assessment (Woodhouse, 2013). Those Chinese literatures on lessons from US quality assurance system also recognize that accreditation is an efficient way of quality assurance in higher education.

In Chinese literature, the terms “质量保障” (“Quality Assurance”), “质量控制”, (“Quality Control”), “质量监督” (“Quality Monitoring), and “质量管理” (“Quality Management”) are often used interchangeably, although they all refer explicitly or implicitly to the policies, regulations, and activities to improve quality in higher education. In the case of the United States, the very first implication of the English term “Quality Assurance in Higher Education” is that some acceptable minimal standards are being met. However, in the case of China, when the Chinese term “高等教育质量保障” (“Quality Assurance in Higher Education”) are discussed, whether in government documents or in scholar papers, people lay stress to “continuous enhancement” (“不断提高”). This is probably because quality assurance in the US derives from the tradition of academic autonomy and accountability, while in China quality in higher education became a hot topic as the national strategy of higher education shifted from quantitative expansion to quality improvement, which brings a sense of urgency to enhance instead of maintain quality. This difference is critical for any discussion of or reference to “Quality Assurance” (“质量保障”[*ZhiLiangBaoZhang*]) between English speakers and Chinese speakers since implications of the English term “Quality Assurance”, namely minimal standards, quality maintenance, quality improvement, and accountability, are not fully captured by the same words translated into Chinese.

The most common use of the word “认证”[*RenZheng*](“Accreditation”) in Chinese higher education is the verification services provided by Ministry of Education to acknowledge the authenticity of diplomas and other documents of education experience (“学历认证”). In fact, the first page of search results of the Chinese words “高等教育认证” (“Higher Education Accreditation”) from both Google and Baidu<sup>2</sup> is all about the verification service mentioned above. Therefore, in the context of higher education in China the term “质量保障”[*ZhiLiangBaoZhang*] (“Quality Assurance”) is not so close to “认证”[*RenZheng*] (“Accreditation”) as in US. Instead, “质量保障”[*ZhiLiangBaoZhang*] (“Quality Assurance”) in Chinese higher education is related to “评估”[*PingGu*] (“Evaluation”), as evaluation is a primary means of higher education quality assurance in China (Shi, 2008; Weng, 2009; Wang, 2014). Dr. Jinghuan Shi, a Tsinghua University professor studying quality in both Chinese higher education and foreign higher education, states in a presentation on the 2008 Institute of Asia Pacific Higher Education Research Partnership that “there had not been a well-developed quality assurance mechanism in higher education of China” and that “(there are) efforts from both the government and higher education institutions in building up the quality assurance system in higher education through evaluation.” Under such circumstances, discussion of the Chinese word “认证”[*RenZheng*] (“Accreditation”) in higher education requires detailed explanation of the definition and implications of this word.

Yet, more and more meanings and implications of the English term “Accreditation” are being attached to the corresponding Chinese word “认证” [ *RenZheng* ]. To meet the requirements of cross-border recognition of graduates based on substantial equivalence, China has built up accreditation process for some programs such as engineering and medical science, and the Chinese word “认证” [ *RenZheng* ] (“Accreditation”) is used on all occasions related to accreditation of such programs. Dr. Jiaju Bi, a

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<sup>2</sup> Baidu is the most popular searching engine in China. Searches are done at 7:07 pm, April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

pioneer in introducing international experiences of quality assurance to Chinese higher education and a leader to build the Chinese accreditation system of engineering programs, used to refer the accreditation in US higher education as “鉴定”[JianDing] (“Authentication”) in his early Chinese papers (Bi, 2003). However, after the establishment of Chinese accreditation system of engineering programs in 2006, he began to use the Chinese word “认证” [RenZheng] (“Accreditation”) to denote what “Accreditation” actually means in English. China Academic Degrees and Graduate Education Development Center (CDGDC), on the other hand, uses the term “质量认证” [ZhiLiangRenZheng] (“Quality Accreditation”) to distinguish the new meanings of “认证”[RenZheng] (“Accreditation”) from the traditional verification services in Chinese higher education. Such emerging meaning of the Chinese word “认证” [RenZheng] (“Accreditation”) should be promoted in higher education in China and further to public discussions of quality in higher education for better global communication and cooperation.

### **Standards vs Indicators**

In the English context of quality in higher education, “Standards” usually refers to the standards accrediting bodies establish. According to CHEA’s definition, the term “Standards” means both fixed criteria against which an outcome can be matched and a level of attainment. “Standards” state an expected level of requirements and conditions against which quality is assessed or that must be attained by higher education institutions and their programs in order for them to be accredited or certified. Meanwhile, the term “Indicators” are a set of tangible, operational measures on which evidence can be collected and that allows for a determination of whether or not standards are being met. Typical indicators include admission and graduation data, research records, employment of graduates, and staff workload, etc. It is straightforward from the definitions that “Indicators” is of a lower level than “Standards” and serve to present evidence to judge whether standards are met.

Compared to the term “Indicators”, implications of the term “Standards”, first of all, is that “Standards” convey both quantitative and qualitative characteristics of higher education institutions/programs. Second, at a higher level, “Standards” are mission-oriented and contain strong aspiration and values. The mission statement is a key component of standards of accrediting bodies in the US, and it usually appears in the first standard and guides the institutions/programs through self-reflection. Last but not the least, requiring a specific level of attainment, “Standards” serves as the “gatekeeper” as they define the field/profession of accredited institutions/programs, set a minimal threshold for entry, and select who is in by awarding accreditation status.

Similar to the emerging meaning of “认证” [RenZheng] (“Accreditation”) in Chinese, there is also an emerging meaning of “认证标准”[RenZhengBiaoZhun] (“Accreditation Standards”) that conveys the English implications of the term “Standards” mentioned above in discussions of quality in engineering, business, or medical science programs. Also, in Chinese discussions of higher education generally, distinction similar to that between “Standards” and “Indicators” in English has been made, such as “quality standards are the basis and precondition of further discussion of indicator system for quality

evaluation.”<sup>3</sup> (Cai and Chen, 2012) However, the Chinese word “标准” [BiaoZhun] (“Standards”) is most common seen in a term named “高等教育质量标准” (“Higher Education Quality Standards”), which has not yet received mostly-agreed-upon definitions or implications. Some argue that “高等教育质量标准” (“Higher Education Quality Standards”) contains objectivity that can be measured<sup>4</sup> (Dong and Chen, 2010) or compare “高等教育质量标准” (“Higher Education Quality Standards”) to a ruler (Li, 2013), both of which are contradicting to the English implications of “Standards” in the context of quality assurance in higher education. Meanwhile, some recognize the characteristics of multi-dimensions and values-orientation of “高等教育质量标准” (“Higher Education Quality Standards”)<sup>5</sup> (Zhou, 2004; Fu, 2005), which is consistent with part of the English implications of “Standards”.

Some scholars even call in Chinese both of what are regarded as “Standards” and “Indicators” in English different types of “标准” [BiaoZhun] (“Standards”). Xingnan Zhang, Director of Higher Education Research Center of the National Institute of Education Science, states, as quoted in *Higher Education Quality Standards and Evaluation* (Wang, 2010), that:

*“The first type is evaluative higher education quality standards, which are usually expressed through operational indicators on which (evidence) can be collected and their quantifiable measures...The other type is cultivating higher education quality standards, which standardize through descriptive regulations the quality requirements on program objectives, content, teaching process, and faculty forces and so on of talents training in higher education.”<sup>6</sup>*

Thus various Chinese terms are often referred as “标准” [BiaoZhun] (“Standards”) in higher education, such as “培养方案” (“educational plan”), “评估指标体系” (“evaluation indicator system”), “学位基本要求” (“degree basic requirement”), and “学位标准” (“standards of degrees”). Moreover, in the *Evaluation Plan* (评估方案) issued by Ministry of Education (2004), what are called “指标” [ZhiBiao] (“Indicators”) and “等级标准” (“Standards for grading”) both contain part of the implications of

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<sup>3</sup>“质量标准是质量评估指标体系的内在根据,对质量标准的讨论是进一步确定质量评估指标体系的前提。”

<sup>4</sup> “不能否定高等教育质量标准所具有的、能够被人测量的客观实在性”

<sup>5</sup> “多样性”“价值取向”“多维度”

<sup>6</sup> “一类是评价性高等教育质量标准。这类教育质量标准的通常以可操作、可采集的指标及其数量化的指标值来表达。……另一类是培养性高等教育质量标准。这类标准以描述性的规定将高等教育的人才培养在专业目标、内容、教学过程、师资等方面的质量要求加以标准化。”

“Standards” of English meaning. For example, the “二级指标” (“Second-class Indicator”) contains both quantitative information such as “教学经费” (“Teaching Expenditure”) and “师资队伍数量” (“Number of Faculty”), and qualitative information such as “学校定位” (“Self-identification”), “质量控制” (“Quality Control”), and “教师风范” (“Manner of Teachers”). So some of these “指标” [ZhiBiao] (“Indicators”) are not as operational, tangible or measurable as the English definitions and implications of “Indicators” indicate. What are called “等级标准” (“Standards for grading”) do mean what “Standards” mean in English to include both criteria against which an outcome can be matched and a level, actually levels of A,B,C and D in China’s case, of attainment

In sum, meanings and implications of the Chinese term “标准” [BiaoZhun] (“Standards”) are not exactly those of English term “Standards”, because sometimes it is consistent with “Standards” of English meanings, but sometimes it contradicts. On the other hand, various Chinese terms, even including “指标” [ZhiBiao] (“Indicators”), that do not translate to “Standards” in English might refer to or serve the purpose of “Standards”. For such complexity, careful distinctions and detailed explanations should be given to these terms when discussed internationally.

### Assessment vs Evaluation

The terms “Evaluation” and “Assessment” can refer to a set of techniques, procedures, instruments, and methods for measurement and analysis (Patil and Gray, 2009). In the context of quality in higher education, “Evaluation” is the process of observing and measuring a thing for the purpose of judging it and of determining its “value,” either by comparison to similar things, or to a standard, while “Assessment” is the process of objectively understanding the state or condition of a thing, by observation and measurement. Another commonly used pair of terms is “Formative Assessment”, which measures for the purpose of improvement, and “Summative Assessment”, which normally refers to “Evaluation” (ITLAL, University of Albany). In a presentation in 2002<sup>7</sup>, H. Stephen Straight illustrates in the following tables detailed differences between assessment and evaluation.

Dimensions of Differences	Assessment	Evaluation
<b>Timing</b>	Formative: ongoing to improve learning	Summative: final to gauge quality
<b>Focus of Measurement</b>	Process-oriented: how learning is going	Product-oriented: What had been learned

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[http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CB4QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.binghamton.edu%2Facademics%2Fprovost%2Fdocuments%2Fdocuments%2Fassessment-evaluation-straight.ppt&ei=s-8mVZfaloGxsAWAzlHYDA&usg=AFQjCNHig8shWBMxqOQGGAoLKGnD-qs7xQ&sig2=v6iukl6RoVzn3uOjHmRMiQ&bvm=bv.90491159,d.b2w](http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CB4QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.binghamton.edu%2Facademics%2Fprovost%2Fdocuments%2Fassessment-evaluation-straight.ppt&ei=s-8mVZfaloGxsAWAzlHYDA&usg=AFQjCNHig8shWBMxqOQGGAoLKGnD-qs7xQ&sig2=v6iukl6RoVzn3uOjHmRMiQ&bvm=bv.90491159,d.b2w) (Link to the PPT slides)

<b>Relationship between Administrators and Recipient</b>	Reflective: internally defined criteria/goals	Prescriptive: externally imposed standards
<b>Findings, Uses Thereof</b>	Diagnostic: identify areas for improvement	Judgmental: arrive at an overall grade/score
<b>Ongoing Modifiability of Criteria, Measures Thereof</b>	Flexible: adjusts as problems are clarified	Fixed: to reward success, punish failure
<b>Standards and Measurement</b>	Absolute: strive for ideal outcomes	Comparative: divide better from worse
<b>Relation between Different Objects of A/E</b>	Cooperative: learn from each other	Competitive: beat each other out

When using English to discuss quality in Chinese higher education, both government officials and scholars refer to the techniques, procedures, instruments, and methods to collect data, and measure and analyze quality of higher education institutions as “Evaluation” (“评估”[*PingGu*]) ( CDGDC; Shi, 2008; Wang 2014). In fact, both “Evaluation” and “Assessment” are appropriately translated to “评估” [*PingGu*] (“Evaluation” hereafter) in Chinese, which may be the primary reason why people do not make distinctions in Chinese between the meanings of “Assessment” and “Evaluation”. However, according to Straight’s table, the “评估” [*PingGu*] (“Evaluation”) of higher education in China is more like a hybrid of “Evaluation” and “Assessment” of English meanings. On one hand, “评估” [*PingGu*] (“Evaluation”) in higher education of China is a summative activity that arrives at overall scores, namely Excellent (优秀), Good (良好), Pass (合格) and Fail (不合格). Most “指标” [*ZhiBiao*] (“Indicator”) in the current *Evaluation Plan* are product-oriented and quantitative. The criteria or standards are imposed externally and “评估” [*PingGu*] (“Evaluation”) does award success, punish failure and divide better from worse. All these imply consistent meanings and implications of the term “Evaluation” (“评估” [*PingGu*]) in English and in Chinese. On the other hand, the “指标” [*ZhiBiao*] (“Indicators”) do contain process-oriented ones such as “教学方法” (Teaching Methods) and “实践教学” (Practical Learning). What is more, along with a final score, “评估” [*PingGu*] (“Evaluation”) in China produces detailed reports for evaluated institutions to identify areas for improvement and strive for ideal outcomes. Finally, the *Evaluation Plan* has been revised for several times to adjust for new situations where problems are fixed and new needs emerge. In this sense, “评估” [*PingGu*] (“Evaluation”) in Chinese also manifests some implications of “Assessment” in English.

Because the Chinese word “评估” [*PingGu*] (“Evaluation”) very well captures two English words



“Evaluation” and “Assessment”, international discussions of “Evaluation” requires extremely careful attention. In Chinese discussion of the US experience of quality assurance, one should specify whether he means “Evaluation” or “Assessment” when using the Chinese word “评估” [PingGu] (“Evaluation”). Similarly, in English discussion of China’s experience of quality assurance, one should carefully define “Evaluation” and its implications in China.

## Conclusion

International discussions of quality in higher education could be in vain if each party attaches different meanings and implications to the same word used in discussion. “Accreditation”, “Standards”, “Indicators”, “Assessment” and “Evaluation” are all key terms of “Quality Assurance” in higher education. In the US, “Accreditation” is one of the means of “Quality Assurance” in higher education. However, in China relation between “认证” [RenZheng] (“Accreditation”) and “质量保障” [ZhiLiangBaoZhang] (“Quality Assurance”) is less close since “认证” [RenZheng] (“Accreditation”), as known by most Chinese people, refers to verification services provided by Ministry of Education. “质量保障” [ZhiLiangBaoZhang] (“Quality Assurance”) in Chinese, instead, is relevant to the term “评估” [PingGu] (“Evaluation”), which is the primary approach of quality assurance in Chinese higher education. However, what are denoted as “评估” [PingGu] (“Evaluation”) in Chinese resembles a combination of what are denoted as “Evaluation” and “Assessment” in English. In addition, meanings and implications of “标准” [BiaoZhun] (“Standards”) in Chinese sometimes accord with those of “Standards” in English, while sometimes they contradict. And various Chinese terms, even including “指标” [ZhiBiao] (“Indicators”), that do not translate to “Standards” in English might refer to what “Standards” mean in English. All these complexities bring great challenges to international conversation of quality in higher education, as each of these terms requires careful attentions and detailed explanation whether used in Chinese or in English.

The bright side is that with more and more interaction between practitioners and scholars in the US and Chinese higher education, there are some emerging meanings attached to these terms in Chinese, which communicate what they mean and imply in English. An outstanding example is the emerging meaning of “认证” [RenZheng] (“Accreditation”), which is getting more and more reference in government documents, media reports, and academic discussions. Distinction of terms in different languages is just a starting point. For better future global cooperation in quality assurance, the emerging, commonly shared meanings of these key terms of quality in higher education should spread to both professional and public discussions.

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