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*Original Paper*

# Reforming China's "Open Bidding for Selecting the Best Candidates" Mechanism: Insights from Jiangsu Province

Weiwei Zhang[1]

[1] School of Mathematics and Statistics, Yancheng Teachers University, Yancheng, Jiangsu 224007, China

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***Abstract***

*The "Open Bidding for Selecting the Best Candidates" (OBSBC) mechanism is a key strategy for addressing major scientific and technological projects by pooling innovation resources and reforming science and technology management through project solicitation, list publication, demonstration, bid submission, and evaluation. This paper examines its application in Jiangsu Province, highlighting its success in fostering technological innovation, industrial transformation, and global competitiveness. It also identifies issues such as unreasonable pricing, insufficient information disclosure, and a lack of risk-sharing and failure compensation mechanisms. The article suggests strategies to enhance the OBSBC mechanism by refining project screening and publication, strengthening project implementation, improving evaluation and rewards, and fostering a collaborative research ecosystem. The goal is to offer guidance for nationwide development.*

***Keywords***

*Issues, Jiangsu Province, Mechanism, Open Bidding for Selecting the Best Candidates (OBSBC), Scientific projects*

## 1. Introduction

The "Open Bidding for Selecting the Best Candidates" (OBSBC) mechanism is crucial for project breakthroughs, involving steps like project solicitation, list publication, and evaluation. It integrates innovation resources, reforms science and technology management, and boosts technological innovation and industry transformation. This mechanism is key to enhancing Jiangsu Province's technological capabilities and is widely used for core technological advancements, industry research, and cutting-edge R&D. This mechanism has enabled effective collaboration among industry, academia, research institutions, and end-users, benefiting both list publishers and bidders (Chen, J. et al., 2023).

Jiangsu Province's OBSBC approach includes models like "task-based listing", "frontier-guided listing," and "enterprise-proposed listing." However, it remains in the exploratory phase, with issues in top-level design and processes such as screening, list publication, bid submission, project implementation, and evaluation. Challenges include an unreasonable pricing mechanism, limited evaluation methods, inadequate information disclosure, lack of risk-sharing and failure compensation, incomplete supporting policies, and a need for further optimization of the ecosystem involving talent, technology, finance, platforms, and policies (Zeng, J. & Huang, G., 2022; Zeng, J. et al., 2023).

It is imperative to address the challenges associated with the development of the OBSBC mechanism for key science and technology projects in Jiangsu Province. Efforts should be continuously directed towards optimizing the project screening mechanism, as well as the processes involved in list publication and bid submission. Additionally, there is a need to enhance the evaluation methods for key science and technology projects, improve bonus fulfillment mechanisms, and strengthen intellectual property protection frameworks. Establishing an information database and cloud service platform for the OBSBC initiative is also crucial. Moreover, guided by the principles of benefit and risk sharing, it is essential to enhance risk compensation and failure tolerance mechanisms, and to develop a diversified, collaborative, and deeply integrated scientific research innovation ecosystem.

The OBSBC system aims to boost scientific and technological innovation by focusing on major research projects and advancements. It seeks to integrate resources, attract talent, and achieve research breakthroughs through a process of project solicitation, public posting, appraisal, candidate selection, and evaluation. In 2016, China advocated for this approach in core technology research, emphasizing capability-based participation. The "14th Five-Year Plan and 2035 Vision Outline" also supports nationwide exploration of this mechanism. These developments clearly show that creating a "public posting and selection" mechanism for awarding projects is a major strategic initiative.

Jiangsu Province has issued policy documents to enhance the management of provincial financial scientific research funds, outlining systems for project identification, public posting, candidate selection, and evaluation. The province is also exploring various models for awarding projects, such as defining tasks and leaders, identifying frontiers and forming teams, and soliciting projects from enterprises with global participation, all through public posting. The province has launched innovative projects like OBSBC to advance core technologies and intelligent manufacturing, creating a model suited to Jiangsu (Si, L. et al., 2022). To this end, the research team used field surveys, interviews, and data analysis to review the mechanism's implementation across Jiangsu cities, identify challenges, and suggest improvements.

## 2. The Era Value of Building the OBSBC Mechanism

The OBSBC mechanism fosters innovation, reforms the science and technology management system, enhances independent innovation, and tackles technological bottlenecks. It also supports the growth of new industries like new energy, AI, and biotechnology, driving industrial transformation and boosting national scientific and technological competitiveness.

### *2.1 Enhancing Innovation Resource Integration and Reforming the Science and Technology System*

China has recently advanced from "following" to "leading" in areas like new energy vehicles, energy storage, aerospace, and AI. The traditional innovation model of introducing, digesting, and absorbing is now insufficient. Integrating resources, optimizing innovation, and overcoming technological "bottlenecks" are essential for reforming the science and technology system. The OBSBC mechanism, originating from the British Longitude Prize of 1714 awarded to John Harrison, remains a key incentive for scientific and technological innovation (Chen, J. et al., 2023). Countries like the United States and Germany have embraced the OBSBC mechanism for significant research projects and technological breakthroughs, enhancing its popularity.

This mechanism involves government departments creating a technology transaction platform to manage the posting, bidding, and evaluation of research projects, while offering services like matchmaking, policy support, and financial subsidies. By integrating resources through these processes, the OBSBC mechanism fosters collaboration among industry, academia, research, and application, driving advancements in major projects and core technologies (Zeng, J. et al., 2023). Cities such as Nanjing, Suqian, and Suzhou have tailored regional OBSBC mechanisms to align with their local industrial and innovation strategies.

Moreover, the OBSBC mechanism prioritizes capability over credentials and merit over seniority, reforming the scientific and technological innovation system. It boosts researchers' initiative and creativity, offers more opportunities for grassroots scientists, and cultivates a diverse and dynamic scientific innovation environment.

### *2.2 Advancing Technological Innovation and New Productive Forces*

As economic development models transform, scientific research and technological innovation have become key drivers for developing new productive forces and upgrading China's economy. In areas like new energy vehicles, energy storage, intelligent driving, innovative drugs, medical devices, drones, and aerospace technology, China is venturing into new realms of innovation, where traditional methods of adopting and improving existing technologies are no longer adequate.

The OBSBC mechanism targets R&D in core components, materials, processes, and industrial tech foundations, focusing on areas like lithography machines, high-end chips, aircraft engines, and quantum computing. Supported by a national system that pools resources for major tasks and led by top experts, it integrates scientific resources to drive breakthroughs in fields like new energy vehicles, biotechnology, and intelligent driving, supporting industrial transformation and the development of

new productive forces (Jiang, Y., 2023).

For instance, Jiangsu Province has identified key technologies and scientific frontiers as priorities for its OBSBC initiatives, focusing on foundational projects with long R&D cycles and uncertain paths, such as large gallium nitride materials and photonic quantum chips. Lead scientists have the freedom to assemble teams, manage funds, and create research platforms, which boosts motivation and fosters innovation in major projects and key technological fields (Zeng, J. et al., 2023). Notable achievements include: Shi-Ning Zhu's team focuses on photonic quantum chip technology, Guangji Wang's team works on real-time visualization of CAR-T and other cell drugs, and Qian Chen's team develops non-interference quantitative phase imaging and diffraction tomography. These accomplishments represent significant breakthroughs in China's technological innovation.

*2.3 Addressing Intensifying Global Tech Competition*

In the digital economy, technological innovation drives economic growth and is a key competitive arena for major powers. Amid significant global changes, tech competition among China, the U.S., Europe, Japan, and South Korea is intensifying. Leading in areas like AI, quantum computing, biotechnology, aerospace, and new energy, and controlling key tech and industrial segments, is crucial for international competition and great-power rivalry (Li, B. & Li, H., 2024).

As the Sino-US trade and tech wars intensify, strategic competition between China and the US in areas like semiconductors, space, hypersonic weapons, AI, and 5G is escalating. Key technological breakthroughs are crucial for China's industrial transformation and national rejuvenation. Since 2018, the US has cited national security to suppress Chinese tech firms like Huawei and DJI through sanctions and embargoes, aiming to hinder China's industrial and technological progress. Notable actions include sanctions against ZTE, Huawei, and SMIC, and export bans on China's semiconductor industry.

The OBSBC mechanism is a "Chinese-style bounty" system that uses technology competitions and financial incentives to boost scientific and industrial innovation. It is results-focused, collaborative, and effective, characterized by precision and innovation. This approach meets the technological needs of industries and promotes talent and innovation (Zhou, Y. et al., 2023; Shi, A., 2024). For example, the Jiangsu Institute of Advanced Semiconductor Technology partnered with 15 research institutions to form an OBSBC team, achieving a breakthrough in semiconductor technology by exceeding 10,000 volts in the breakdown voltage of gallium nitride devices on a 6-inch silicon substrate, significantly advancing China's semiconductor chip technology.

## 3. Analysis of the Current Status of OBSBC Mechanism Construction

Research shows that Jiangsu Province has developed a comprehensive OBSBC mechanism, exploring various models for major research initiatives, industry studies, and corporate technological challenges. These efforts have strengthened Jiangsu's scientific and technological innovation system and research capabilities. However, there are still issues with the top-level design, institutional framework, operational mechanisms, and supporting policies. Additionally, gaps exist in the customization, posting, bidding, and evaluation of OBSBC projects.

### *3.1 Major Models of the OBSBC Mechanism*

Studies in cities like Changzhou, Suzhou, and Nanjing reveal that the OBSBC mechanism also functions as a technology transfer system, integrating industry, academia, research, and application for precise project alignment. The OBSBC models in Jiangsu can be categorized as follows: Task-Defined Bidding with Appointed Leadership, Frontier-Inspired Bidding with Team Participation, Enterprise-Proposed Bidding with Global Solicitations, and Demand-Posted Bidding with Online Participation.

#### 3.1.1 Task-Defined Bidding with Appointed Leadership

Major livelihood issues, research challenges, and industrial bottlenecks often have positive externalities, limited commercial appeal, and lengthy R&D cycles, leading to a lack of motivation from enterprises to tackle them. To address this, the Jiangsu government directly poses challenges and invites bids from research institutes, tech enterprises, research teams, key labs, and universities. Industry experts and scholars then evaluate these bids to select research institutions for major projects.

In 2022, for example, Changzhou City used methods like needs collection, site visits, and expert assessments to compile 27 major Technical Requirements Lists. These were promoted on platforms like "Innovation Changzhou" and "Innovation China," with a total posting value over RMB 100 million. Of these, 21 projects went to domestic research teams, while Swiss and Australian teams also secured bids, totaling RMB 81.1 million in awards.

#### 3.1.2 Frontier-Inspired Bidding with Global Participation

Jiangsu Province has introduced a model where the government or enterprises "post challenges" in frontier fields and cutting-edge technologies, allowing research teams and scientists to "submit bids." The government supports selected teams with funding and policies, focusing on capability over background or experience (Li, B. & Gai, B., 2020). In 2023, Changzhou City used this approach, offering 36 projects worth RMB 130 million in new energy and materials, with individual projects valued between RMB 2 million and 8 million. The initiative received 134 bid proposals. China Medical City in Taizhou, Jiangsu, held a promotional event in Shenzhen to showcase OBSBC projects in biomedicine, novel chemical drug formulations, and in vitro diagnostic reagents, aiming to attract top talent and create a development model where industry and talent mutually enhance each other.

3.1.3 Enterprise-Proposed Bidding with Global Solicitations

In Jiangsu Province, with over 24,000 high-tech enterprises facing innovation and technological challenges, cities like Changzhou and Nanjing have implemented the OBSBC mechanism. This system allows enterprises to present problems, the government to issue challenges, and global solvers to submit bids. Jiangsu Province held the J-TOP Innovation Challenge, attracting over 500 tech innovation challenges from companies offering financial rewards for global solutions. Notably, Kunshan Jihai Industrial Co., Ltd. offered RMB 20 million for a "high-efficiency non-Newtonian fluid mixing technology" solution and successfully found a bidder.

3.1.4 Demand-Posted Bidding with Online Participation

To tackle challenges in resolving enterprise tech issues and technology property transactions, Jiangsu Province launched an online platform to connect technology needs with bidders (Xue, Y. & Wang, X., 2021). For instance, Jiangsu Almine New Materials Co., Ltd., a high-tech fireproofing company, used the OBSBC platform in Huai'an City's Jinhu County to quickly find a bidder to overcome its technological hurdles.

*3.2 Developmental Achievements of the OBSBC Mechanism*

Jiangsu Province has actively developed technological innovation mechanisms by integrating industry, academia, research, and application, enhancing innovation and development. In 2024, it led all provinces in patents per 10,000 people for the ninth year, with high-value invention patents three times the national average. Jiangsu's OBSBC mechanism is among China's most advanced, with cities like Changzhou, Suzhou, Nanjing, and Yangzhou achieving significant results. For instance, Changzhou's 20 OBSBC projects in 2022 led to 41 patent applications and 13 copyright registrations. Upon completion, these projects are expected to generate RMB 410 million in sales revenue.

Yangzhou City launched the OBSBC initiative to support businesses, resulting in 631 technological needs published, 203 industry-academia-research collaborations initiated, and over RMB 100 million in cooperation funds secured. Notably, Yangzhou Fuda Hydraulic Machinery Group was matched with Zhou Yingguo's research team from Jiangsu University of Science and Technology, leading to a contract for enhancing large gate valve technologies.

The OBSBC mechanism is crucial for enterprises addressing core technology and research challenges, widely used in scientific and technological fields (Zhuo, C. & Chen, J., 2024). For example, the Taizhou Science and Technology Bureau, along with Provincial and Municipal Industrial Technology Research Institutes, jointly invested RMB 47 million to create 18 OBSBC projects within the "1+4" industrial system. These projects target common issues, core technologies, and frontier challenges in Taizhou's industrial upgrade.

Many enterprises in Jiangsu are using the OBSBC mechanism to solve internal technological issues by issuing "hero invitations" for skilled employees. For instance, the No. 2 Oil Production Plant of Jiangsu Oilfield identified 42 production challenges and invited employees to tackle them, resulting in 14

employees signing responsibility agreements. This approach has boosted Jiangsu's technological innovation and research capacity. In Changzhou, 20 OBSBC projects engaged 467 researchers, including 102 PhD candidates, and attracted teams from institutions like Beihang University and the University of South Australia, enhancing the city's innovation capabilities.

Changzhou Mingsai Robot Company and Hebei University of Technology collaborated to develop advanced motion control technology for dispensing robots, filling a technological gap in China. The OBSBC mechanism fosters collaboration between industry, academia, and research, boosting innovation efficiency and benefiting all parties involved, while significantly enhancing Jiangsu's technological capabilities.

*3.3 OBSBC Mechanism Shortcomings*

Despite Jiangsu Province's progress with the OBSBC mechanism, it is still in the exploratory phase, lacking comprehensive legal frameworks, technical standards, and policies for systematic management. The process, involving stages like project screening, bidding, and evaluation, is complex and intertwined with intellectual property and technology transfer issues, often resulting in design flaws, institutional gaps, and legal disputes.

Firstly, there are issues in the project screening phase's mechanism design. In Jiangsu, projects are mainly initiated through government customization and public solicitation. Government-customized projects target major research challenges, technologies vital for regional industrial upgrading, and critical "bottleneck" technologies. While this ensures strategic research alignment and focuses resources on key technologies, it can also cause mismatches between technological supply and demand and lead to project homogenization (Sun, J. et al., 2022). For example, in cities like Changzhou, Nanjing, and Suzhou, government-customized projects often focus on similar fields like energy conservation, environmental protection, AI, and biotechnology, resulting in inefficient innovation resource allocation. Additionally, departments like the Science and Technology Bureau and the Industry and Information Technology Bureau invite research projects aligned with local industrial plans and challenges, organizing OBSBC initiatives. However, these government bodies often struggle to accurately assess industry trends or the specific needs of enterprises, leading them to set bidding requirements based on experience rather than precise data, which can hinder research and contract fulfillment (Zhang, J., 2022). Cities in Jiangsu have not yet fully adopted models like "Enterprise-Proposed Bidding with Global Solicitations" or "Demand-Posted Bidding with Online Participation," facing issues such as underdeveloped OBSBC platforms and frequent information gaps between project posters and bidders.

Secondly, there are significant institutional weaknesses in the project bidding phase, including issues with pricing, evaluation methods, reward structures, and fulfillment mechanisms. Many projects offer low financial incentives or have strict conditions, making them less appealing to researchers and institutions. Additionally, poor promotion and outreach fail to attract top research talent. Evaluators

often lack a deep understanding of enterprise operations and technology, affecting candidate selection. The information disclosure process is underdeveloped, allowing bidders to withhold or misrepresent data, while posters impose overly restrictive conditions to safeguard their interests.

Thirdly, the project evaluation and awarding phase suffers from design flaws, including flawed evaluation methods, unclear intellectual property rights, and reward disputes. The evaluation system is weak, lacking milestone-based assessments and alignment between evaluations and rewards. Additionally, there's no risk-sharing or compensation mechanism, leaving bidders to shoulder excessive risks and costs if projects fail (Yi, G., 2023).

Finally, the low commercialization of research findings and an underdeveloped innovation ecosystem pose major challenges. Technological research projects rely on talent, technology, funding, platforms, and policies, and any deficiency can impede OBSBC project implementation. Jiangsu's integration of industry, academia, research, and application is still immature, and its system for transforming research outcomes needs improvement. These issues hinder innovation resource integration and complicate project execution. Furthermore, many research teams and universities excel in technological innovation but lack skills in market financing, resource integration, and market research, leading to a dependence on intermediaries. The market for essential financial, talent, consulting, and legal services for OBSBC projects is underdeveloped and doesn't meet necessary construction requirements.

## 4. Strategic Recommendations for Building the OBSBC Mechanism

Drawing from Jiangsu Province's experience, the OBSBC mechanism aligns technological innovation supply and demand, energizes research institutions and innovators, and advances major projects, "bottleneck" technologies, and foundational research. Continuous innovation and optimization of the OBSBC system are essential, focusing on overcoming construction challenges in Jiangsu.

### *4.1 Enhancing the OBSBC Process*

To address institutional gaps in Jiangsu's OBSBC stages—screening, posting, bidding, implementation, and evaluation—it is crucial to refine legal frameworks and policies. This involves creating the Jiangsu Province OBSBC Research Project Work Guidelines to streamline project solicitation, expert evaluation, announcement posting, bid selection, and fund management.

On one hand, top-level design and project planning for OBSBC should align with local industrial development and transformation goals (Xu, B. et al.). In 2024, Suzhou initiated the "Eight Major Projects" to boost technological innovation in key industries like new energy and semiconductors, offering up to RMB 10 million for enterprise-led projects and RMB 3 million for university-led initiatives. Similarly, Suqian focused on 20 industrial and innovation chains to address technological challenges using OBSBC.

On the other hand, the posting and bidding method should align with the nature, role, and difficulty of research projects. For critical technologies and strategic projects, government-customized models like "Task-Defined Bidding with Appointed Leadership" or "Frontier-Inspired Bidding with Team Participation" can be used after expert evaluation. These projects can be led by top scientists or elite teams. For projects related to industrial upgrades or with high commercial value, models like "Enterprise-Proposed Bidding with Global Solicitations" or "Demand-Posted Bidding with Online Participation" are suitable. Platforms from departments such as the Science and Technology Bureau can enhance supply-demand matching. For instance, enterprises can utilize the "J-TOP Innovation Challenge Season" platform to publicly offer rewards for research projects and technical challenges, enabling research teams to bid based on their skills and qualifications.

*4.2 Improving Project Implementation and Operations*

The OBSBC process for R&D projects involves timelines, bidder evaluation, project acceptance, reward distribution, and intellectual property ownership, which can lead to conflicts and legal issues. Relevant departments should issue policies to refine rules on rewards, intellectual property, technical standards, and assessments, enhancing the standardization and precision of OBSBC projects (Xu, B. et al., 2024). Strengthening the information disclosure mechanism by specifying required details like technical standards and reward distribution will improve transparency and standardization.

Focus on enhancing databases and cloud platforms for OBSBC (Shi, X. et al., 2023). Upgrade the Jiangsu Science and Technology Resource Coordination Service Cloud Platform and optimize the provincial technology contract registration system. Establish a comprehensive online OBSBC platform for sectors like education, agriculture, and environmental protection. Implement a blacklist to exclude participants with poor credibility. Create a database of top scientists, researchers, teams, institutions, universities, and key labs, assessing their expertise and capabilities. This will support OBSBC initiatives by providing dynamic data through expert, policy, research institution, and researcher databases.

*4.3 Enhancing OBSBC Evaluation and Rewards*

Evaluation and rewards are vital for OBSBC's success, influencing research projects and system implementation. A mechanism combining process and outcome assessments should be developed, considering project nature, content, and technical difficulty. This approach should support phased evaluations and reward distribution (Wu, J. & Yin, W., 2022; Xu, B. et al., 2024). An evaluation system involving government, experts, industry, and executives can assess project progress, outcomes, and patents. Dynamic tracking allows for milestone evaluations and staged rewards. Projects can be divided into phases, with rewards linked to objective completion, and incentives or penalties tied to progress and funding.

To address high uncertainty and failure rates in research projects, a risk-sharing and failure-tolerance mechanism should be developed based on benefit sharing and risk mitigation principles. This approach should allow for trial and error by establishing due diligence exemptions and interest compensation. For instance, Jiangsu Oilfield, when setting rules for OBSBC projects in 2024, anticipated potential project failures and implemented a due diligence exemption system for bidders.

*4.4 Enhancing Policies and Systems for OBSBC*

OBSBC integrates industry, academia, research, and application, relying on policies, talent, services, research teams, and development (Zeng, J. & Huang, G., 2022). A systematic approach is essential to evaluate OBSBC mechanisms and policies, promoting a collaborative research innovation ecosystem. The gap between research entities and enterprises has led to a disconnect between research and application (Zhu, H. et al., 2023). Jiangsu can utilize AI, big data, cloud computing, and blockchain to create an "Internet + OBSBC" model, offering services such as project publicity, precise matching, and technical contract signing.

A comprehensive platform should be created to integrate technology transactions, sci-tech finance, and innovation incubation, offering services like policy consultation, talent recruitment, market financing, technology assessment, and transfer. This will provide comprehensive innovation services for both providers and seekers. Additionally, the financial service system for OBSBC projects needs enhancement. Given the high risks and uncertainties in technological innovation and R&D, strong sci-tech finance and quality funding are crucial. Thus, it's essential to analyze capital operations and financial needs of research projects to continuously improve the sci-tech financial service system.

To tackle complex technological innovation challenges, regions in China have adopted practices like "research crowdsourcing" and "technology bounties," creating a unique OBSBC mechanism (Li, H. et al., 2022). China needs to integrate goal-driven and problem-solving strategies to reform its science and technology management system. The 2021 Government Work Report supports expanding the OBSBC mechanism nationwide. Jiangsu, with its dynamic private sector and technological innovation, faces significant challenges in industrial upgrading and high-end manufacturing. It should further explore OBSBC, learning from past experiences to enhance the mechanism continuously.

**Conflicts of interest**

The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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