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Me, Wang Hui, and Liberal Wishy-washy-ness

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By Peter Zarrow

Wang Hui is a cultural historian and critic, and professor at Qinghua University in Beijing. He was for several years editor of *Dushu*, a serious general interest magazine perhaps roughly — very roughly — equivalent to the *Atlantic* monthly in the US. He is also known as a leader of the so-called “New Left” intellectuals, who highlight the costs of economic liberalization, global capitalism, and rigid Western-style modernization policies. Early this year, charges of plagiarism began to appear concerning some of some of Wang Hui’s work. He has since been subject to numerous attacks, including ad hominem blog attacks.

This month I signed a letter/petition that was organized by several Western scholars who know Wang Hui and his work. The letter was sent to Qinghua University and defends Wang Hui’s “scholarly integrity.”

This week I received an email from somebody whose name I didn’t recognize. This person asked if I was aware that my name was on a letter of support for Wang Hui in his plagiarism case, and forthrightly asked, “How would you know if Wang did plagiarize or not?”

Good question, but it is not the main issue to me. Our letter does not, technically, state that its signers are sure Wang did not commit plagiarism. What it says is that those “charges have been contested and discredited” and that his translators in the West and Japan have “never found any indication of plagiarism no matter how loosely this word is defined.” Granted, this does come close to categorically denying the plagiarism charges — but not quite.

What follows are my opinions alone, and I do not speak for any of the organizers or other signatories of the letter to Qinghua. Much of the discussion of the case, especially but not only in the West, has dealt with the academic-political context, and suggests that the “real reason” Wang Hui came under attack was his political opinions. I do not know enough about Chinese academic politics to have an opinion on that issue; my concerns are simply about “due process” and the essential ambiguity of plagiarism.

For me, as a wishy-washy liberal, the issue is that Wang Hui should not become victim of an academic witch-hunt. Or to switch metaphors, judging from my browsing of the internet, I do not want to see web lynching or a media circus. There is something truly weird about many of the attacks. I am not sure whether Wang Hui has ever committed “plagiarism.”

So what is to be done? Plagiarism charges are serious and should be investigated by impartial scholars familiar with the materials. In the United States, in my profession, the American Historical Association has conducted such investigations through its Professional Division.

For the record, I have met Wang Hui briefly, on one occasion at a conference. About two years ago, I began reading his 4-volume *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang de xingqi* (2004) to my considerable gain and occasional befuddlement. I have not read his earlier work on Lu Xun, which is the main target of the plagiarism charges. One of my colleagues alerted me to the plagiarism debate when it began popping up on Chinese websites, so I have been following it for some time. (My colleague and I have also discussed why, of all the substantial work being done in China today, Wang Hui’s should have attracted unique attention in the West. Doubtless this has to do with scholarly trends, academic fads, personal relations — issues beyond the scope of this piece.)

It’s always fun to play academic “gotcha,” and indeed we scholars collectively rely on our mutual surveillance system to weed out bad work. This highlighting of the issue of plagiarism may have good effects in China in the long run. On the other hand, our letter to Qinghua has already provoked a reaction on some Chinese blogs that I would call defensive parochialism. Who are these foreigners to interfere in a Chinese affair? Why are they covering up Wang Hui’s “crimes”?

But it is important to keep some perspective. Our letter to Qinghua does not oppose calls for an investigation. It notes our belief in the essential importance (and, yes, "integrity") of Wang Hui's work and decries the way charges and enemies' lists are proliferating.

I have read Wang Binbin's original article, which shows that several paragraphs of Wang Hui's dissertation on Lu Xun were copied/paraphrased from Western theoretical works with at most a vague "See X" kind of citation. I have seen less-documented charges of plagiarism concerning some of Wang's other works. My understanding is that the publications that printed Wang Binbin's article did not ask Wang Hui for a response; if this is the case, it would seem to be a lapse of professional standards on their part.

In historical perspective, if I may digress as a historian, Chinese scholarship has consisted of nothing so much as what we today call plagiarism. It advanced by the battle of the unattributed quotation. Quotation vs. quotation: one's own position was revealed by the classical and post-classical quotations one chose to repeat, chose to neglect, and tweaked slightly. One's interlocutors, being equally well educated, didn't need to be guided to the source. Among modern intellectuals, my hero Liang Qichao was perhaps the greatest plagiarist of them all.

The point? To put it a bit simply, vague standards of what constituted plagiarism existed at least through the 1980s, when Wang Hui was writing his dissertation. Now, even Wang's most die-hard supporters admit he was guilty of sloppy footnoting. I can further see the case of calling it plagiarism — depending on what you mean by that term. What Wang apparently did leaves me distinctly uncomfortable. I am not prepared to see him purely as a victim (not yet, anyway).

But I am not prepared to say, with some scholars, that Wang Hui absolutely committed the academic crime of plagiarism. Nor am I prepared to say, with other of my colleagues, that he certainly did not. In the absence of a real investigation, I am ready to conclude that size does matter. A few paragraphs at the beginning of a vastly productive career need to be understood in context.

One question I have asked myself is, suppose this were a case of a Western scholar at a Western institution. It is discovered s/he translated several paragraphs from another language in his/her dissertation and — sort of — seemed to write as if they were his/her own words. He or she is a tenured member of the faculty at a prestigious university with a rich record of publishing in their academic field and outside of it as well. Yes, now what? In American Historical Association investigations of plagiarism charges, there were real consequences: some people lost their jobs and some publications were withdrawn, but only after the texts in questions were literally laid out side by side. And some people were cleared. One good feature of the AHA's Professional Division that Chinese might pay attention to, is that it was not an ad hoc committee set up for any particular case but was prepared to investigate any charges brought to it on the basis of clearly-written standards.

Pending a fair investigation of these charges, I'm prepared to leap to a wishy-washy conclusion on the basis of the limited evidence I've seen. If Wang Hui committed plagiarism in several paragraphs in an old piece of writing, let's publicly humiliate him. OK, job accomplished. But let's also note that he has written a great deal of undoubtedly original and thought-provoking scholarship since then. If the university and professional authorities in China can organize an open and transparent investigation based on hard evidence, more power to them. In the meantime, I'm moving on.

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