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More Questions Than Answers

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More Questions Than Answers

July 26, 2010 in [Op-Ed](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [1 comment](#)

Earlier this month, we ran [an opinion piece by Peter Zarrow](#) concerning the plagiarism accusations against Tsinghua University Professor Wang Hui, in which Dr. Zarrow explained why he had signed a letter of support organized by international scholars and sent to Tsinghua's president. The essay was picked up and circulated by the [MCLC listserv](#), where it generated a number of comments. One of the responses came from [Michelle Yeh](#) of UC Davis, and we asked Dr. Yeh if she would expand her remarks and share them with China Beat readers. She has done so in the essay below, and also provided a Chinese translation.

We welcome additional comments on this continuing matter. Short opinion pieces can be submitted by e-mail to [thechinabeat\[at\]gmail\[dot\]com](mailto:thechinabeat[at]gmail[dot]com).

By Michelle Yeh

To be accused of plagiarism is a serious matter. To accuse someone of plagiarism is just as serious. When I catch a student plagiarize (which, unfortunately, has occurred a few times in my career), I turn the case over to the student judiciary affairs office at my university with supporting evidence. The office investigates it, holds a meeting with the student, reaches a conclusion and metes out punishment based on university policy. Although I have never personally witnessed a plagiarism case involving a professor, I would imagine that the procedure would be more or less the same. After all, we as professors not only expect our students to follow the rules, but we as tacit role models also have an obligation to do likewise.

That's why when the plagiarism charge Professor Wang Binbin 王彬彬 initially made against Professor Wang Hui 汪晖 in March has turned into a protracted debate and controversy, I wonder what's going on. Did the accuser present plausible evidence? If the answer is affirmative, why wasn't it investigated right away by Tsinghua University, where Professor Wang Hui is employed? If the answer is negative, why wasn't the case thrown out immediately, and why wasn't Professor Wang Binbin subjected to investigation by the appropriate authority?

As a concerned observer, I read the letter signed by "more than eighty international scholars" that was submitted to the president of Tsinghua University on June 9th, as posted on [Sciencenet](#). I also read the letter on [Global Voices Online](#) which had gone out previously to solicit "endorsements" from scholars outside mainland China. (Apparently, scholars in Hong Kong were considered "international" too, since several are among the signatories.) [Editor's note: the solicitation letter is posted by Oiwan Lam in the comment section of the page linked to above.]

The two letters add a new wrinkle to the ongoing controversy. The solicitation letter (for which Global Voices Online provides no date or signatory) states that Professor Wang Hui did nothing but "sloppy footnoting." The letter submitted to Tsinghua University doesn't even mention that, but simply says that all allegations of plagiarism lack "credibility." However, without providing any objective evidence, the letter is just as "baffling" as what it claims to be an "organized attack" by the media. Here's why:

1. Why do the letters repeatedly label the "media" (or "popular media") as the villain? Wang Binbin is a professor, as are many others who have commented on the issue in print or on-line. Moreover, Professor Wang's article was originally published in *Literary Studies* (文艺研究 *Wenyi yanjiu*), a leading scholarly journal in China. Why does the letter set up an artificial binary opposition of "academy" vs. "media," "us" vs. "them"?

2. Isn't this artificial binary opposition contradicted by what the letter later refers to as "ordinary cultural politics inside the university"? Which is it, an attack by the ignorant but evil media, or internecine politics among professors? If this were indeed just "ordinary cultural politics inside the university," why would it have become "a mediatized frenzy" (quoted from the solicitation letter)?

3. Even IF the allegation had been initiated by the media (which it was not), why should it matter? The issue seems to be black and white: Is there verifiable evidence of plagiarism? There maybe exist varying definitions (or degrees) of plagiarism, but why shouldn't documented allegations be investigated? Given the "baffling" situation surrounding the allegations, wouldn't it be a good idea for the signatories to request a transparent, impartial investigation?

4. When the letter accuses allegations and critiques of Professor Wang's plagiarism as "organized," how would the same logic not apply to the defenses that have appeared since March? Isn't the letter itself an example of "organized" defense?

5. The letter alludes to several Chinese scholars' rebuttals in defense of Professor Wang Hui. What it doesn't say is that these rebuttals have been rebutted too. The solicitation letter mentions: "[W]e are preparing a bilingual website that will give a chronology of the attacks and information from scholars living in China who have carefully studied the case and have declared the charge of plagiary to be a non issue [sic]." Why wasn't the website available to the signatories before—not after—they signed the letter? More than a month later, is this website available now? Does it provide complete and factual documentation? For example, does it include further allegations of plagiarism related to Professor Wang's recent work and the rebuttals, if any, that have been made?

6. The letter explains that "media attacks on the universities during times of extreme social and economic transition are common." Isn't one of the media's responsibilities to be society's watchdogs, to monitor and oversee public institutions? The U.S. media do this all the time. Why does it only happen in "times of extreme social and economic transition"? Could this be another example of Chinese particularism?

7. Why does the media's publication of plagiarism allegations demonstrate their "contempt for research," as the letter claims? Isn't it exactly because the media care about scholarship and the institution of university that they bring the matter to the fore? What are the criteria for judging scholarship? What are the standards of professional ethnics? Doesn't the letter itself, with its inflammatory language, show "contempt for research," peremptorily accusing anyone who questions Professor Wang's scholarship of "attacking" him out of political motivations?

8. Even if we leave aside the question of whether or not translators of Professor Wang's work are the most impartial judges in this matter, wouldn't it be logical for Professor Wang to rebut the original allegation as soon as possible? If one were wrongly accused of plagiarism, one would be upset of course, but one would probably find it laughable too—laughable because the allegation was so obviously fabricated and unfounded, as the letter suggests. Wouldn't a brief, definitive statement from the wrongly accused clear it all up? At the very least, wouldn't the wrongly accused demand a transparent, impartial investigation? Wouldn't that be the best way to clear one's name?

In my view, the "letter of more than eighty international scholars" did a disservice to Professor Wang Hui and to Chinese academia. Instead of providing textual evidence to counter effectively the allegations of plagiarism, it simply blames the "media," a code word for anyone and everyone who questions Professor Wang. Instead of asking—and expecting—Tsinghua University to conduct an investigation of all the allegations, it simply attributes them to "normal cultural politics within the university," as if falsely accusing one's colleagues of plagiarism were a "normal" thing to do! Worst of all, the letter misleads both lay readers in China and scholars outside China into thinking this is how plagiarism charges are normally handled by American and Chinese universities. The fact is there has been more than one such incident in China in recent years involving a distinguished professor. In the earlier cases, investigations were conducted by the universities, and, when plagiarism was found to have been committed, the professors were given appropriate punishment. Only in Professor Wang Hui's case do we see a group of "international scholars" rushing to intervene without providing any textual evidence. Would these "international scholars" have shown the same lack of faith in their own universities and the same kind of disrespect for university procedures? In short, the letter misses the opportunity to turn a crisis into a proverbial "teaching moment."

I give Professor Wang Hui the benefit of the doubt in this ongoing controversy, not because he is a preeminent scholar—why should stature, fame, or influence override issues of professional ethics?—

but because I am hopeful that Chinese academia will show, to China and the world, that it is capable of self-discipline, transparency, impartiality, and accountability. Was plagiarism committed or not? If it wasn't, what would be the consequence for the accuser? If it was, what would be the consequence for the accused?

I am still waiting...

* * *

对“八十多位国际学者联合签署的公开信”的回应

奚密，加州大学—戴维斯校区

被指控抄袭是一件很严重的事，指控别人抄袭也是很严重的事。当我发现学生抄袭时（很不幸的，这件事在我的教书生涯中发生过几次），我将案子，连同证据，移交给大学的学生法务处。法务处立刻进行调查，约谈学生，做出结论，并根据大学政策给予惩处。虽然我从没直接见证过任何教授抄袭的案件，但是我想处理的程序应该是大同小异吧。到底，作为教授，我们不仅指望学生遵守校规，我们身为默认的楷模，更应如此。

因此，当王彬彬教授对汪晖教授的抄袭指控，从三月份至今演变成一场持续的辩论和争议时，我想问问这到底是怎么回事？指控者有没有提出可信的证据？如果有，为何汪晖教授任教的清华大学没有立刻调查？如果没有，为何指控没有立刻被驳回？为何诬告者王彬彬教授没有接受相关当局的调查？

作为一个关心的观察者，我读了六月九日由“八十多位国际学者”联署，呈递给清华大学校长的声援汪晖教授的信（转载在[科学网](#)）。我也看了“全球声音网”（[Global Voices Online](#)）转载的稍早的邀请函，恳请国外学者“赞助”联署信。（明显的，邀请者将香港学者也归类为“国际学者”，因为有几位该地学者也在名单上面。）邀请函和联署信为这场争议增添了一个新的角度。邀请函（“全球声音网”上没有署名也没有日期）说汪晖教授只是犯了“注脚马虎”的毛病。给清华大学的联署信上对此只字不提，只说所有的抄袭指控都毫无“可信度”。这封信没有提供任何客观证据；相反地，它跟其指称的“媒体攻击”一般的“令人困惑”。仅就其困惑之处提出几点看法。

首先，公开信一再将大众传媒贴上万恶之首的标签，为何？最先发表对汪晖抄袭的指控的王彬彬是教授，多位后来在网上或平面媒体上发表言论的人士也是教授。再说，王教授的文章首发在国内的重要学术刊物《文艺研究》上。该信为何建构了一个伪二元对立：“学院”和“传媒”、“我们”和“他们”的对立？

第二，建构此伪二元对立和该信后文所说的“大学内部正常的文化政治”之间难道没有矛盾吗？究竟是何者——无知邪恶的传媒，还是教授之间的内斗？如果这果真只是“大学内部正常的文化政治”，它又如何会演变成一场“疯狂媒体炒作”（引自邀请函）呢？

第三，即使抄袭的指控是由传媒发起的（而事实并非如此），又有何差别呢？这件事本该黑白分明，非此即彼：到底有没有抄袭的可供公开检验的证据？抄袭的定义（或程度）也许存在着某些相对性，但是列举了具体证据的指控为什么不应该接受调查？既然整件事那么“令人困惑”，为何联署信的具名者不要求一个透明、公正、彻底的调查呢？

第四，联署信指责所有对汪晖教授抄袭的指控和批评是“有组织的”。此逻辑难道不同样适用于三月以来发表的为汪晖教授的种种辩护吗？这封公开信本身难道不是“有组织的”辩护吗？

第五，联署信说几位中国学者已为汪晖教授提出有力的辩驳，但是它没提这些辩驳也曾遭到辩驳。邀请函说“我们正在准备一个双语网页，列出攻击的时间表和中国学者在仔细研究过此案后，认为抄袭不成立的声明。”“这么重要的网页为

何不在国际学者签署之前——而不是之后——准备好呢？事隔一个多月了，这个网页准备好了吗？它是否提供了完整客观的资料？例如，它包括了对汪晖教授近作的指控以及对这些指控的辩驳吗？

第六，联署信认为“在社会和经济的激烈转型期，媒体对大学的攻击是很常见的现象。”难道大众传媒的角色不应该是社会的“看门狗”，不应该对公共体制有所监督吗？美国传媒一向如此，为何它只会发生在“社会和经济的激烈转型期”呢？难道这又是一个中国特殊性的例子？

第七，联署信指称，传媒对抄袭事件的报道流露了传媒“对研究的不屑”，为何？难道不正是由于传媒对学院和学术的高度关注才将此议题公诸于世吗？学术研究的标准何在？学术道德的标准何在？该信充满了煽动性的措辞，认为所有对汪晖教授的质疑都是出于政治动机的“攻击”。这难道不是一种“对研究的不屑”态度吗？

第八，即使我们不去考虑汪晖著作的外语翻译者是否最公平客观的裁判，逻辑上，汪教授为何不尽早反驳抄袭的指控呢？如果一个人被冤枉了，他当然会非常愤怒，但是也会觉得有点可笑吧。如果指控摆明了是无中生有的捏造，为何一个被如此冤枉的人不用一篇简洁有力的反驳来澄清事实呢？至少，他会要求清华大学进行透明公正的调查来还他清白。难道那不是还他清白最好的方法吗？

我认为，“八十多位国际学者联合签署的公开信”不管对汪晖教授还是对中国学术界，都是有害无益之举。没有提供任何文本证据去有效地反驳抄袭的指控，该信简单地怪罪于“传媒”——即所有质疑汪晖教授的人。没有要求——和期待——清华大学对所有的指控进行调查，该信简单地将它们归结为“大学内部正常的”政治斗争——好像诬告同行抄袭是教授们的“正常”举动似的！更甚者，该信误导了一般读者和国外学者，让他们误以为美国大学和中国大学都是这样处理抄袭案件的。事实上，近年来中国国内也发生过几起著名教授涉嫌抄袭的事件。那些案件发生后，他们的大学都进行了调查；而当抄袭被证实之后，涉案教授都受到适当的惩戒。只有在此次汪晖教授事件里我们看到一群“国际学者”在不提供任何文本证据的情况下就急于介入。如果今天事情发生在他们自己任教的大学，他们也会表现出对制度对程序如此的不信任和不尊重吗？换言之，套句美国谚语，该信错过了一个将危机提升为“教诲时刻”（a teaching moment）的机会。

面对这场仍在持续中的争议，我宁愿假设汪晖教授是清白的。如此假设不是因为他是国际知名的学者——名气、地位、影响都不应该是检验学术道德的主要考量——而是因为我相信中国大学体制能对中国人民和国际学术界证明它具有自我监督、公正透明、勇于负责的能力。到底有没有抄袭？如果没有，诬告者应该承担什么后果？如果有，犯错者应该承担什么后果？

我还在等待.....

Michelle Yeh is Professor of Chinese at the University of California, Davis.

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