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Wang Hui, Plagiarism, and the Great Bourgeois Academic Cultural Revolution

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By Susan D. Blum

Another revolution is afoot in China, and it might even be considered cultural. But this one is about academic culture, as China's slow-moving iceberg floats up against the glacial mass of "international" (read: Western) principles. The fallout is fascinating for observers, though in some cases tragic for the participants.

In recent months Qinghua University professor Wang Hui has been attacked for having committed academic misconduct in his dissertation in the 1980s (see coverage at [Global Voices Online](#), [China Beat](#), and [Xinhuanet](#)). Centenary College in New Jersey [has shuttered a graduate business program in China](#) because so many of its students plagiarized. *China Daily* has an article about "[Academic Corruption Undermining Higher Education](#)." Philip Altbach writes a blog post in Inside Higher Ed about "[Academic Fraud and the Academic Culture in China—and Asia](#)." Faculty in US universities write distraught responses to all this, detailing how many of their Asian (not just Chinese) students commit academic fraud or plagiarism. *The Economist* takes on academic misconduct in China.

What is going on?

Is this a moral panic—a sudden focus on a concrete episode or bit of conduct representing an outlet for more generalized anxieties, often about social change?

Is this a case of genuine cultural difference, in which ideas of authorship and educational efficacy, authority and deference, differ between nations?

Is this a case of China-bashing, of Westerners seizing upon a misdeed and generalizing, gleefully, from the tendency of a few within China to act improperly?

Is this a case of many individuals knowingly violating accepted and proper norms?

The answer to all these questions should be obvious: It depends.

I'd like to begin by reminding you that "plagiarism" has at least two meanings, one of which is inadvertently omitting citation or reference to a source (or doing so imperfectly), and the other of which is deliberately incorporating material from another's work and passing it off as one's own, knowing that this will mislead readers. Students are more likely to commit the former, and professionals the latter. These two types of plagiarism might be considered more appropriately "improper citation" and "deliberate plagiarism, or fraud." These two types of misdeeds should be treated with different types of responses; the first is best addressed through education. The second perhaps should be punished, though it rarely is.

China is in the midst of a great upheaval in terms of higher education and intellectual work in general. Now second only to the US, China's scientific research productivity is on track to be the highest in the world (see [this article](#) at the *New York Times* and [this "Room for Debate" discussion](#) for more on the topic). Chinese attendance in higher education [has risen](#) from about 400,000 in 1978 to almost 4.5 million in 2004 (and more since then), in large part at private, not public, institutions. Many students are trying to get through their student years however they can, knowing—or at least hoping—that their career prospects will improve if they have a degree. (Credentialism leads to fraud and corner-cutting in education everywhere.)

The number of universities and colleges in China [has increased](#), and the number of faculty has more than quadrupled. The pressure to publish is extraordinary, and many faculty are obliging.

But they may not be writing exactly as their Western colleagues do, and nowhere is that more evident than in citation practices.

As late as the 1990s, attribution and citation were rudimentary; a seminal book might be nodded to, and the works of Marx-Lenin-Mao would be cited out of self-protection. A scholarly book might have a dozen or so citations, and rarely a bibliography. The entire scholarly apparatus that Western/US scholars take for granted was missing. Footnotes were few (See Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote*, 1999). There was an assumption that 1) experts would have read the same material and would be familiar with it and 2) ownership of and credit for ideas was in some sense a bourgeois relic.

The “Western” notion of academic conduct is the momentary constellation of centuries of events, from the growth of higher education to the birth of the idea of the Romantic author and individuality that stems from the Renaissance and other events. It would be possible to imagine an entirely different way of valuing contributions to teaching and researching, but we take for granted that our way is the proper way. (Many scholars of intellectual property, language, and literature/art question the possibility of originality to the extent that our intellectual property laws express, but we approximate them nonetheless.)

Of course, whether our ideas of intellectual credit are arbitrary or culturally constructed or whatever, like all social contracts (think of marriage!), we are obliged follow them. (Except when people don’t, which also happens in the West, of course.)

There is another value at play here: the goal of attaining desired ends by any means possible. I have written about the tendency to focus on the outcome of speech, its consequences, more than on its absolute value as “true” or “false” (*Lies that Bind*, 2007). This is evident here as well: by writing something and publishing it, good things are achieved. That the material is “someone else’s” in a certain framework is irrelevant.

In the last ten but especially five years, China has decided to “compete” with the West in terms of academic stature and value. This has entailed increasing support for higher education and increasing standards for quality, not simply increasing quantity.

But as all writers have noted, it is much easier to increase quantity than quality.

Wang Hui may have incorporated other people’s works without interrupting the text for footnotes in the 1980s, when this was standard practice. I can’t weigh in on the claim that Wang Hui’s position as a public intellectual has made him a tempting McCarthy-esque target.

But what I can say is that the times they are a-changin’ (that is a reference to Bob Dylan’s song from 1963/1964; it can be found [here](#). But citing a popular song seems excessive, doesn’t it?). China is between several paradigms: one that says citation and attribution are optional; one that says winning is China’s or the individual’s right and imperative; and one that says intellectual work must be traced and credited.

Like all cultural change, there are winners, victims, casualties, and much righteous waving of slogans and placards, charging others with moral laxity and venal duplicity. Sometimes the accusations are apt; sometimes they are fabricated; sometimes they harbor old grudges; and sometimes those with plenty of sin cast stones.

Accusing someone of not following rules when they were not in play is absurd. Ignoring the shared rules that everyone has subsequently agreed to is a violation of convention. Scholars in China are slowly signing on, in their hearts and minds, to that slate of conventions. But like all cultural revolutions, we’ll find ambiguity and complexity enough to keep us busy analyzing for years.

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