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Should China Copy the West on Academic Integrity?

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By Susan D. Blum

In recent years, articles have appeared from time to time in the Western press that deal with cases of plagiarism in China and speculated on what these incidents may reveal about how academic life and the educational system in the PRC work. When we learned that anthropologist Susan Blum, one of the contributors to China Beyond the Headlines, a book that was co-edited by a contributor to China Beat (Timothy Weston) and in a sense was trying to do in print form some of the things that this blog now tries to do online, has been combining writing about various aspects of Chinese culture with writing about plagiarism in the U.S. (and elsewhere), we thought it would be great to get her to reflect for us on what is and is not unusual about the situation in the PRC. Here’s what Blum, the author of a new book called My Word!: Plagiarism and College Culture as well as an earlier work on deception and truth in China, Lies that Bind: Chinese Truth, Other Truths (Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), had to say in response to our invitation:

Plagiarism. Doesn’t the very word send chills down your spine? It resembles plague, after all (even though it has no genetic connection to it), and a plague must sicken us all. So the cases of plagiarism and academic misconduct, fraud, copying, and misrepresentation that are the latest ills to beset China make for great journalistic stories. China should, by some accounts, take its lead from the “West,” and especially from the United States.

In case you haven’t noticed, the United States too is consumed by worries about plagiarism and violations of academic integrity. But we have the sense that things are worse in China.

The whole topic of plagiarism depends on related ideas of originality. By a certain logic, developed in Western Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, an author should write original works (Woodmansee 1984, Rose 1993), and should be paid—in both money and “credit”—for that contribution, especially because the best authors were seen as geniuses, inspired by their Muse or by God. The unique work of each of these geniuses should be acknowledged. And paid.

Thus was born the notion of copyright, which is connected with but not identical to the admonition to give credit to our sources.

Academic writing, which is not always—to say the least—touched by genius, borrows from this sense that the author has made a unique contribution and should be gestured to. But it also has a professional scaffolding, the guild rules, if you will, that uses a person’s prior learning to demonstrate proper deference and training. We do that, as Anthony Grafton showed in his book The Footnote, in our footnotes. They give credit. They allow readers to pursue our line of thinking. And they show that we are following the rules.

These are the rules we teach our students and these are the rules we follow, at least when we do follow them.

In the United States college students fail to follow these rules sometimes; in surveys about 66% of our students admit to using uncited material. They do so for a variety of reasons: The rules are extremely subtle and difficult to master properly. The students are busy with a variety of other compelling activities and don’t want to take the time on a particular assignment. The assignment is meaningless to the student. The student has waited until the last minute and just needs to fill up pages, with anything. Some of these reasons may have to do with integrity and some with failed education.

But you can imagine a different notion of writing, a different path in history that does not regard writing as an individual possession. (Many of our students do, in this age of collaboration and Wikis.)

You could imagine a notion of writing where sharing was more important than hording.
You could imagine an academic system where people were hired and rewarded on the basis of contacts, seniority, and cooperation rather than publication and competition.

You could imagine a notion of education where quoting authority showed the proper deference of youth.

You could even imagine a place where a culture hero claimed “I transmit, I do not invent (or create).” (This saying is attributed to Kongzi, known as Confucius, in *The Analects*.)

Such a place would have a different set of rules about what is supposed to be found in footnotes and in papers, and writing in this place would not be seen as violating universal morality, but rather as following its own logic.

Until very recently, these have been some of the rules governing academic writing in China.

Now, of course, China has left behind its twentieth-century academic isolation and would like to make intellectual contributions to the global academic world. China is now producing more people with higher education degrees than the U.S. and India combined, according to the BBC. China is investing heavily in tertiary education. China’s faculty are no longer rewarded simply for loyalty. So new rules are evolving.

And like all social change, it is clear that it happens unevenly. Now that several Chinese universities are ranked in the top 100 in the world, and collaborations between Chinese and foreign scholars are common, Chinese universities have agreed to follow “international” notions of academic integrity, meaning that all work must declare its origins. (Never mind that there is great variation among nations in how this is regarded.) Deference has given way to the confident claims of invention.

As in any high-stakes system—the SAT, Wall Street, publication in prestigious fora—one finds some individuals willing to take enormous risks. Some are sociopaths, such as journalist Stephen Glass who fabricated an entire story in *The New Republic*. Some claim sloppiness, such as Doris Kearns Goodwin. Scientists wishing glory may also write fraudulent papers, such as three recent professors at Zhejiang University. He Haibo copied and fabricated results published or submitted to eight journals; two colleagues were implicated with him. *China Daily* called it the “biggest-ever academic scandal.”

Here we have a case with several possible explanations:

– Chinese people cheat.

– Some Chinese people cheat.

– Some people cheat.

– China follows imperfectly international guild rules about academic practices.

– China’s acceptance of the rules of academic citation are in flux and so far have been mastered imperfectly.

Which answer is preferable may depend on whether you want China to be similar to or different from people elsewhere, and whether you believe in an enduring Chinese essence.

I believe that in some sense the rules of academic conduct are arbitrary, but like any game, the players must follow the rules. Violations occur occasionally, both in the West and in Asia, and are rarely caught or punished. The American Historical Association recognized its powerlessness in enforcing rules against plagiarism in 2003, though it encouraged historians to follow and teach students about proper rules of conduct.
There are some traditional practices that may endure in China, such as having novices quote from authorities as part of their education, and there is a tendency to regard communication as effective based on the results it produces.

But there are also new forces at play in China, having to do with the way academics are compensated for speed of publication and uniqueness of contribution.

In this sense China is copying the economic structure of the Western academy. And in this sense the temptations for cutting corners in order to “scoop” everyone else or at least to pile on publications are just like ours.

In this sense, imitation may be the best form of flattery, but both the source and the copier would profit from a different model.

Sources Cited

Susan D. Blum is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Notre Dame. She is the author of the recent works Lies that Bind: Chinese Truth, Other Truths (Rowman and Littlefield 2007) and My Word! Plagiarism and College Culture (Cornell University Press 2009).

Tags: plagiarism