

Plagiarism, Chinese Learners and Western Convention *

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the issue of plagiarism from the perspective of Chinese students studying in a UK higher education institution. The Chinese learning culture generally emphasises a substantial period of imitation before creativity can be contemplated. In writing, this frequently translates into quoting other people's work as an integrated part of one's writing. Moreover, the Chinese culture does not emphasise attribution of cited text, which is often construed as plagiarism by the Western culture. From the learner's point of view, however, what is taken as plagiarism is often one of the routes Chinese learners use to achieve competency in writing. This article suggests judging suspicious cases of plagiarism on the ground of student effort spent in researching and writing, rather than on the formalities of citation. In terms of plagiarism administration, methods for avoiding plagiarism and detecting plagiarism are discussed, although it is recommended that teachers of Chinese learners be more pedagogically-minded, rather than concentrating on "discipline".

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1. Introduction

According to the statistics of the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, the applications from Chinese students to study in a UK university have “increased almost ten-fold” in the previous three years at the time of reporting (BBC News 2002). As more and more Chinese learners come to the UK to pursue higher education, various problems begin to surface as a result of cultural differences, one of which is the Chinese students’ potentially different conception of plagiarism. This sometimes creates problems for British educationists, since the behavioural patterns relating to plagiarism on the part of Chinese learners may be very different from those stereotyped in a Westerner’s mind. The issue can soon become very stressful and confusing for a British tutor teaching Chinese students. It is the aim of this article to identify the ideology behind the writing practice of Chinese learners and discuss problems likely to be caused by it. Hopefully, this will help to bridge the gap between Chinese learners’ behaviours and Western educators’ understanding of the issues.

On a different note, this article also wishes to provide an alternative angle for viewing plagiarism, and the concept of text ownership in general. This will be examined in the context of second language writing, with special reference to Chinese learners of English as a foreign language. In particular, Rebecca Howard’s idea of “patchwriting” will be re-examined in the context of Chinese learners in UK higher education. It will be argued that academic writing instructions have to be adjusted to help Chinese learners to express their thoughts in ways that are congenial to the Western intellectual tradition.

2. Cultural background

This section will focus on aspects of the Chinese culture which, in the author’s mind, are relevant to the Chinese learners’ attitudes towards plagiarism. Bearing in mind Yin’s (2003) warning that the Chinese societies and value perceptions are never unitary, I shall assume that some fundamental ideologies exist in all Chinese societies, just as there exist rudimentary similarities between the various Chinese dialects.

Imitation is an integral part of learning in the Chinese tradition. This is true for many aspects of intellectual or artistic activities, for example, Taichichuan, Chinese calligraphy, and composition. In all these activities, pupils begin the learning processes by imitating either a live-performing master (in the case of Taichichuan) or historical documents (calligraphic manuscripts or classical verses). The imitation process is usually long – months for Taichichuan and years for calligraphy in many cases. In terms of learning to write, students are encouraged (and sometimes required) to read and memorise portions of classical works and use them in their own writing. In this kind of skill learning, creativity has to be built upon the foundation of imitation. This shouldn't be too surprising to people from other cultures, as Matalene (1985) seemed to imply, since no civilised activities can really be learned from scratch, without following any existing model. The difference is in the degree of emphasis on imitation and originality, not on the nature of the overall learning process.

It will be a mistake to assume that there is no element of creation for a Chinese learner embarked on a learning journey of certain knowledge or skills. Although imitation is the general starting point in many disciplines, there is a great deal of variation as to when creation comes into play. As Crew (1987: 829) recognized: “A Chinese person abuses 4000 years of rich Chinese creativity when the person mindlessly copies”. In other words, creativity is still a vital part of the Chinese culture; otherwise there would not be such a wealth of artistic, literary, philosophical, and other cultural heritage to this date. For some Chinese learners, the creation part comes early and in plenty, and for others, it comes late and/or in smaller portion. This is comparable to researchers' finding that the less bright students seem to be more prone to cheating (see, for example, Williams 2001, Jensen et al. 2001, Szabo & Underwood 2004).

Delza (1967: 450) captured the essence of Chinese-style learning nicely when she pointed out that, in practising the fixed forms of Taichichuan, “although this composition is not an original for anyone, the participator, in re-enacting the structure,

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creates it anew, so to speak, and is transformed by it". Similar to the art of Taichichuan, the imitation of styles and the memory of elegant phrases and verses are expected to transform the person into a creative writer, not just an automatic vending machine capable only of spitting out what is stored. Again, the goal is the same for Chinese and Western writing pedagogies, only the procedures are slightly different.

3. Plagiarism: existing view

An easy and quick definition of plagiarism is "using the work of others as if it were one's own" (Rosamond 2002). In scholarly discussions, plagiarism is usually classified based on the nature and/or the degree of reprocessing of the text involved. Edlund (1998), for example, identified three types of plagiarism: (1) Turning in someone else's paper, (2) The Internet "pastiche" and (3) Improper paraphrasing. With respect to Chinese learners, based on the cultural background previously mentioned, I distinguish between three categories relevant to this essay:

1. **Blatant stealing:** The student may transplant entire text or paragraphs and submit this as his own work with very little editing.
2. **Close imitation:** The student may follow an existing text very closely in content, wording, structure, style, and so on.
3. **Integrated borrowing:** The student may imbed others' phrases or sentences here and there in his own text without proper acknowledgement.

I have personally encountered Case 1 and Case 3 in my first year of teaching in a UK higher education institution, while Matalene (1985) discussed Case 2 extensively. In all cases the unacknowledged parts in a student's writing may involve more than one source.

Blatant stealing is not culture specific – it happens to students of all nationalities. Students may steal, buy or ask for essays from colleagues, friends, the library, or the Internet, and submit as their own with minor "cosmetic surgeries". Blatant

plagiarism is rare compared to more casual form of plagiarism (Braumoeller & Gaines 2001). Furthermore, blatant stealing is more likely to happen in a content module (e.g. law, see Lee 2002) rather than in an English composition class.

Close imitation, on the other hand, is more of a concern for English writing tutors teaching Chinese students. Some Chinese learners base their compositions on role models, and fit their ideas into the existing framework, so that their output bears remarkable resemblance to the original model. As Thomas (1986: 845) noted, a Chinese student of his “had been reading *Reader’s Digest* for years” and “had memorized and imitated and mastered both its style and its tone”. However, it remains questionable whether close imitation is a form of plagiarism. As Matalene (1986) noticed, one of her students “had clearly appropriated Mark Twain’s form, but with such insight and originality and elegance that the word ‘imitation,’ usually a negative one for us, seems hardly appropriate”. What Matalene felt was exactly what Delza said about transforming a person with the fixed forms of Taichichuan. As the person’s skills mature, new meanings are given to the routines, and creativity is born out of imitation. Close imitation is thus one of the routes leading from dependant to independent writing. As we shall see in a later section, there are other routes for learners to achieve maturity, of which “patchwriting” is one.

I use *integrated borrowing* to mean “using other people’s texts without proper referencing” in this essay. In teaching Chinese students to write academic papers, integrated borrowing can be a persistent problem because, for many Chinese learners, this is the norm of composition in their upbringing. Chinese students often learn to integrate rhetorically “beautiful” phrases and verses in their own writing without bothering to use quotation marks or attribution. Sources of the borrowed text could be classical or contemporary. Although emphases are often laid on historical masterpieces, students seem to extend this free quoting practice to cover anything they could find. Below is an example of integrated borrowing discovered from my student’s assignment:

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(1)

Transit is a multilingual CAT System. Although the other two systems are also multilingual, however, Transit supports more than 100 languages and locales including Asian, Middle Eastern and Eastern European. This means that only Transit allows the target language to become the source language if the company needs to switch languages or add a second source language.

In the above extract, the underlined portion is a direct borrowing from an online document verbatim (see the source text in (2)), without acknowledgment or quotation marks.

(2)

Transit is a multilingual TM System. This means that only Transit allows the target language to become the source language if the company needs to switch languages or add a second source language. (ATA Translation Support Tools Forum n.d.)

Example (1) comes from a student essay of 1584 words, which contains (where discovered) eight integrated borrowings like this of different lengths, amounting to 433 words in total, or 27%. We can see, however, that the borrowed sentence was perfectly integrated into the student writing, as the premise of the borrowed sentence in (1) means virtually the same as that in (2). There is thus a nearly identical context for the plagiarised sentence in both the original and the student texts. This remarkable technique in using borrowed material is, arguably, an interim step for students to master the craft of writing. The only problem is that the student text did not contain a reference or quotation marks.

Of the various forms of plagiarism, blatant stealing is universally felt to be unacceptable (see Myers 1998, for example). As DeVoss and Rosati (2002) pointed out, a teacher is evaluating the student's process of learning when she reads his essay. The process of learning is void in the case of blatant stealing. The

teacher gets upset because all the teaching and learning procedures are bypassed as the student goes directly from enrolment to a plagiarised term paper. On the other hand, if we take student involvement in the process of composing to be the key point of evaluation, then we need to reconsider the definition of plagiarism, as most other forms of plagiarism do involve student efforts to different degrees. The next section will elaborate on this point.

4. Plagiarism: emerging views

Several writers have pointed out that the idea of private ownership of text (and other forms of intellectual property) is a relatively recent development in Western history, with the first copyright laws being enacted in England and the US in the eighteenth century (see Howard 1995: 790). Furthermore, as Myers (1998) pointed out, “European notions about intellectual property were not originally driven by concern for individuals, but by concerns for the economic interests of publishers, following the rise of printing”. Lunsford and West (1996: 403) also observed that, up to this day, “large institutional and corporate interests continue to exploit the Romantic model of composing to promote still more restrictive copyright laws that can only further diminish the public domain”. My point is, while rejecting blatant plagiarism for students and researchers alike, we should perhaps reconsider the notions of authorship, fair use, and so on, avoiding overemphasising commercially oriented protectionism. This reconsideration is important for higher education involving second language writers such as Chinese learners.

Myers (1998) pointed out the difficulty for non-English native speaking scholars working in science and engineering to publish in English journals due to their insufficient English proficiency. In cases like these, she proposed, it should be possible for them to make use of existing language models while injecting their original scientific findings into the sentences and paragraphs adopted from published works. What is important to the world of science is the contribution of knowledge, or the

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content of publication, not the words or the formality. In psycholinguistics, it is common knowledge that, in processing natural language sentences, structures are often discarded after meanings are extracted (see, for example, Wingfield and Titone 1998: 241-243). There is probably little point in questioning how a scientist delivers his new findings if they are original and insightful.

Howard's (1995) idea of "patchwriting" is especially relevant to students writing English as a second language. According to Howard, the reason that international students incorporate chunks of published materials into their own writing with little alteration, is because they don't understand these English texts. This point is supported by Edlund's (1998) observation that "in order to paraphrase a passage from a source, you have to understand it very well". Patchwriting is a kind of scaffolding process which some second language writers adopt before they can satisfactorily function in this language. In patchwriting, students commit themselves to the researching and writing processes in the same way as more able students who are able to switch freely between original writing and quoting (as DeVoss & Rosati 2002 noted, this seemingly easy process to academic staff may not be so self-evident to our students). Since these students are sincerely trying their best to put together an academic work, it seems to me that the tutor should evaluate student originality based on the message conveyed and the overall technique of presentation, without being affected too much by the relatively poorer citation practice.

Another Chinese student of mine provided a good example of patchwriting. This is shown in (3).

(3)

The source text, a professional computing text, should be translated into the target language with the help of TRADOS 6.5 Translator's Workbench and MultiTerm IX. TRADOS 6.5 is one of the world's most popular computer assisted translation tools, with the latest functional enhancements, in one comprehensive, convenient and cost-effective software

package. With Translator's Workbench and MultiTerm IX, the two main TRADOS components, translators can increase their productivity of translation and complete projects faster, analyze files to quote translation assignments, avoid ever having to translate the same sentence twice and also ensure consistency at the term, phrase and sentence level. Although I encountered several problems during the process of using TRADOS, I made the most efficient use as I can and recognized all the features offered by the TRADOS software.

In (3), two patches of text are taken from (4) and (5) respectively. The underlined words in (4) and (5) are the words which the student borrowed.

(4)

With TRADOS 6.5 Freelance, you get all of the world's most popular computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools with the latest functional enhancements, in one comprehensive package. (TRADOS 6.5 Freelance Edition n.d.)

(5)

- Increase your productivity and complete jobs faster
 - Analyze files to quote your translation assignments
 - Avoid ever having to translate the same sentence twice
 - Ensure consistency at the term and sentence level
- (Language Technology for Professionals n.d.)

We can see that the two patches in (3), which include the borrowed texts, are reasonably well-integrated into the overall environment, demonstrating the student's effort in making a good presentation. Although I have no reason to believe the student had difficulty understanding the borrowed text in this incidence, I don't believe the student was lazy or deceptive, either, based on my understanding of the student's behaviour as the student's subject and personal tutor. Instead, I think it is indeed a style of student writing, a kind of interlanguage (Selinker 1972) in

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learning to write. Consequently, I assume the information is appropriated in a useful way, in bridging a gap where the student's own rhetoric devices may still be highly limited.

Thus, at least in the didactic setting, it seems sensible and beneficial to student learning processes to reconsider the inviolability of text ownership and to redefine plagiarism accordingly. This conceptual adjustment is congenial to Dyson's (1995) paper explicating the new thought of "intellectual value" in contrast to the existing notion of intellectual property. According to Dyson, in the new economic world of the Net, information creators will not chiefly be rewarded for their content, but for the follow-up service and other proliferated activities. What matters is no longer the content, which is often given out for free, but the process and the personal relationship generated from the content. To exemplify this idea, Eckel (2002) is offered as a free electronic book on the Web, paralleling the sale of its bound copies on the book market. According to the author, this produces several advantages, for example, valuable reader feedback and publicity on the net, which ultimately will benefit the author as a content creator in ways much more complex than selling the content of the information alone.

When translated into academic terms, the emphasis on information reprocessing and regeneration can mean that the guarding of text ownership be relaxed somewhat in didactic settings. Wilks (2004: 117) had a point when he referred to "benign plagiarism" which was done "in situations where no one is deceived and no author is exploited". Although attribution is still important, perhaps a little sloppiness of the student writers in documenting their sources should be allowed, as long as they are genuinely committed to generating interesting work following the classroom teaching. Using other people's work as their own is still unacceptable, but, rather than going into the prosecution procedure, it may be more sensible for the teacher to go into the didactic procedure and try to find out the true amount of student effort embodied in the work, the difficulties they encounter, and any problems with the management of the course. Especially, when blatant plagiarism is ruled out, it is only fair that the

marking teacher suppress the “emotional factor” and evaluate the student essay based on its merits such as creativity, relevance to classroom teaching, demonstration of research skills, and so on.

Dyson’ remark that “most information is not unique, though its creators like to believe so”, exposed the cruel truth. Most of the sentences and phrases we speak daily are repetitive. Ngram models are statistical models of language built from repetitive sampling of a text at a fixed number of words’ intervals (see, for example, Charniak 1993). Frequent ngrams are frequently used chunks of language which may be collocations, idioms, lexical phrases (Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992), extended lexical units (Stubbs 2002), and so on. According to Wilks (2004: 126), referring to recently conducted, corpus-based studies, “over 50% of English dialogue, even on academic matters, was composed of frequent ngrams”. Language is thus a shared property of society in a very literal sense, since no utterances are really that unique. According to Pennycook (1996: 215), “writing practices are changing, and it is now common to find multiple layering effects in academic texts, where the supposed origin of a quote becomes ever murkier”. Creativity is a mixture of innovative spurts and common routines. To claim 100% text ownership is to claim 5% ownership of the library, 5% ownership of published books and journals, 5% ownership of daily-read newspapers, 5% ownership of language in other people’s brain, and so on. In a word, reuse of text is the norm of human communication, and, at least in some context, attribution of source is difficult, awkward, and/or pointless.

Consider *Colorless green ideas sleep furiously*. In the course of human history some talented individual invented this sentence to illustrate a point in linguistics theory. According to the Western convention, it is important to cite the source and use the “borrowed text” correctly. I examined the evidence of these two kinds of good citation practice by using Google to search the Web. My first query was “colorless green ideas sleep furiously”, which generated 2,700 hits at the time of writing. I next add the word *Chomsky* to the left or right of the doubly quoted sentence, which aimed to find the author of the sentence being attributed within a

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certain span. In both cases (i.e. Chomsky “*colorless green ideas sleep furiously*” and “*colorless green ideas sleep furiously*” Chomsky), there were 1,630 hits. I take this to mean that, possibly in as much as 1,070 uses of *Colorless green ideas sleep furiously* on the Web, the “owner’s” name is not properly attributed. In another experiment, I changed *colorless* to the British spelling of *colourless*. Supposedly, if the same sentence is used with a slight alteration, either the borrower has made a mistake (if this is in quotation marks) or plagiarism should be considered since this constitutes a close imitation or an incomplete paraphrasing. At the time of writing, however, *Colourless green ideas sleep furiously* generates 690 hits from Google. A cursory examination shows about half of these are not in quotation marks. This suggests that the sentence is already being circulated in a sloppy manner among the Western intellectuals. In a third experiment, I keyed in part of this famous sentence, for example, “sleep furiously” (as a phrase) or *colorless* and *sleep* (as two separable words) hoping to find some variants to the canonical form. As a result, I found sentences like the following:

- (6)
- Colorless green thoughts sleep furiously
 - Colorless green dreams sleep furiously
 - Colorless Green Clouds Sleep Loudly
 - Curious green ideas sleep furiously
 - Bright-green ideas sleep very deeply
 - Colorless green advocates sleep furiously
 - Colorless green ideas syndicate furiously
 - Colorless green idea crept into bed with me
 - Colorless “green” ideas are violently sleeping

The variants in (6) shows either the users’ sloppiness in verifying the source (as is obvious in the first case, where *ideas* was replaced with *thoughts*), or their ingenuity in transforming the original in a creative way. In either case, this seems to support a “fuzzy view” of text ownership. The authors of sentences like those in (6) may or may not have properly acknowledged the

source. What matters, arguably, is the new insight added to the old idea and the new inspiration created by the repackaging of the sentence.

5. Teaching and administration policies

In the previous sections, I have surmised the fundamental cultural reasons for Chinese learners involved in plagiarism. Categories of plagiarism have been identified with specific reference to Chinese learners. I have also presented an alternative way of conceptualising plagiarism. In this section, I shall follow the conventional view of plagiarism of the West and discuss its didactic and administrative implications.

It has been found that students are more liable to adhere to the school's values when they have a good relationship with their teachers, such as mutual trust, respect and caring (Murdock et al. 2001). In other words, when a good relationship with school authorities is absent, students are more liable to misbehave, including cheating in assignments and exams. Furthermore, according to Myles and Cheng (2003), international graduate students in Canada seldom make an effort to contact native speaking students, which I think is generalisable to Chinese students studying in the UK. Thus, to persuade Chinese learners to appreciate Western values about intellectual property, the first step is to foster a community spirit in the context of individual classrooms or the entire institution. By this I mean that the Chinese students should receive some "spiritual guide" once in the Western world studying towards a degree, and learn the meaning of *fairness* and its importance to the West which is still dominated by Christian thoughts in a fundamental sense. The reason that the UK universities call the behaviour of cheating *unfair practice* is no coincidence. This signifies a "team spirit" which is often not the dominant concern of the individual and family oriented Chinese ideology.

Some culture-general strategies for avoiding student plagiarism have been identified which are also applicable to Chinese learners. Williams (2001), for example, proposed the CORD method: Culture, Observation, Review, and Discussion,

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where teacher involvement in the process of student coursework is emphasised, as well as the fostering of a classroom culture of honesty and morality. In assigning topics for research, teachers are advised to choose specific topics so it is less easy for students to get hold of readymade materials on the Web. Teachers should also avoid repeating topics year by year lest students should adopt previous student works easily (Culwin & Lancaster 2001). Other plagiarism prevention measures include requesting multiple drafts (DeVoss & Rosati 2002), requiring oral presentation (Austin & Brown 1999), and so on. In the case of Chinese students, teacher involvement in the student composition process should also include “rhetorical support”, so that students learn not only how to cite, but also how to paraphrase, a step farther away from patchwriting and closer to “completely original” writing (note the scepticism here). As Knoy (2000) noted, Chinese learners often write English in an indirect way, placing irrelevant clauses and phrases at the beginning of a paragraph. Teaching Chinese students how to paraphrase, inferring propositions from the original text (Yamada 2003) and then rearranging the information structure according to Western writing convention, could be killing two birds with one stone: students are receiving anti-plagiarism instruction as well as learning to compose on their own.

Other culturally sensitive preventive measures that could be directed towards Chinese students include the Western tutor “assimilating” the Chinese way of intellectual thinking somewhat in order to understand why students write in a certain way at a certain time. Chinese students, for example, are generally in the habit of respecting authorities and accepting whatever is said to them once the source is recognised to be authoritative. Chinese students’ expectation of a uniform answer to an open question is a related issue, which has consequences not only in a more general academic sense, but also in writing academic essays. In the worst case, the student may think that his writing to be too poor to be of any use, and that, for the same topic, there must exist a “model essay” somewhere which he must somehow draw information from. Admittedly, this problem is more difficult for a Western

tutor to solve as this means venturing into the ideological background of the student, or the entire culture. But sympathetic attitudes in this regard can always produce positive results which will make life easier and more meaningful for both Western tutors and Chinese students.

If education fails to convert students to non-plagiarising writers, then the next line of defence for teachers is the plagiarism detection machinery, especially anti-plagiarism software and subscribed service. Such anti-plagiarism facilities can not only work in the background as Big Brother, they can also issue a warning message to potential wrongdoers that plagiarism will be found (Braumoeller & Gaines 2001). To my knowledge, three kinds of plagiarism detection facilities can be distinguished:

1. **Manual detection:** The teacher compares the suspicious student submission to other students' submissions and also queries a Web search engine like Google to see if there is any matched text on the Internet.
2. **Detection software:** The teacher uses a standalone computer programme (e.g. WCopyFind) to compare peer submissions, which also compares new submissions with existing student submissions. Similarities among documents are usually displayable, with percentage indicated.
3. **Detection service:** Commercial institutions devise plagiarism detection algorithms and embed them in a homework submission platform, where student submit essays and teachers receive student assignments along with an originality report. The report is generated through the computer algorithm which compares student submission with Web pages, subscribed electronic resources, previous submissions, and so on. Some vendors of this type of service are: Turnitin, MyDropBox, and JISC Plagiarism Service.

However, the most effective way of preventing plagiarism is still for the teacher to get more involved in student writing processes, requesting research evidence and offering help wherever possible. For the Chinese learners, extra rhetorical support may be needed

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to scaffold students from imitation or patchwriting to more independent academic writing. The emphasis is for the teacher to develop an understanding of the Chinese writing styles and learning culture, and work together with the learner towards a best writing route for the Chinese students, and not for the teacher to be “on the guard” all the time.

6. Conclusion

The discussion in this article in no way implies that Chinese learners are more prone to plagiarism than students of other nationalities. Ethnographic reports on academic misconduct abound regarding students of various nationalities (e.g. Teferra 2001, Lupton & Chapman 2002), with the majority of scholarly discussions regarding plagiarism concentrating on students of the Western culture itself (e.g. Pecorari 2003, Williams 2001, Larkham & Manns 2002, Underwood & Szabo 2003). As Myers (1998) remarked, “despite the stereotype of foreign students who plagiarize, plagiarizing goes on among U.S. students as well”. The point of singling out Chinese learners for discussion lies in the slightly different nature of the issue, that is, plagiarism in this context involves not only different types of educational upbringing but also the complexities of second language writing processes. Dealing with this issue requires both adjustment in teaching methodologies and educational policy, and perhaps a reconceptualization of text ownership.

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