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Plagiarism across Cultures

Is There a Difference?

Joel Bloch

The first part of my title, "Plagiarism across Cultures," raises a question that has been fiercely debated for many years in the field of second-language (L2) composition, particularly in what is called contrastive or intercultural rhetoric (Connor). Research in this area has examined how a student's first language and home culture may affect his second language writing. The second part of my title, "Is There a Difference?" raises another question, of how great are these differences and what is their significance for the teaching of L2 composition. This issue of cultural difference in attitudes toward plagiarism has always been strongly contested, with charges and countercharges about racism and about "essentialism," and whether Western attitudes toward English-language teaching denigrates the cultural values of English-language learners (e.g., Kubota and Lerner). The sharpest division of opinion has been about how cultural differences affect the attitudes these English-language learners have toward plagiarism (Bloch; Matalene; Pennycook; Chandrasoma, Thompson, and Pennycook; Stanley). Much of the research has examined possible cross-cultural differences among English-language learners whose first language is Chinese. Teachers have often jumped on this view of cultural difference to justify their views of plagiarism in Chinese society (Matalene). Many Western educators believe that Chinese students neither understand Western concepts nor feel that such plagiarism is an unacceptable practice. And sometimes this view is true, especially when we define plagiarism in absolute terms.

While China has a long tradition of literacy, the importance it places on collectivism is often seen as dichotomous to the Western concept of individualism. It is often assumed that this collectivistic nature devalues the Romantic concept of authorship prevalent in the West and places a

greater value on imitation. Because it has been thought that China is more of a collective society, it has been assumed that there is less concern for how intellectual property is appropriated or attributed. Therefore, a greater degree of imitation in the creation of new intellectual property is both encouraged and valued. These assumptions underlie the belief that all English-language learners bring to the classroom a different value system in regard to plagiarism than the one prevalent in the West (Howard “Standing”; Chandrasoma, Thompson, and Pennycook). Chandrasoma, Thompson, and Pennycook argue that some forms of plagiarism can be acts of resistance to the dominant forms of rhetoric, especially where these forms contradict the students’ own epistemological traditions (189).

These problems can be especially true in Chinese cultures where imitation has long been highly valued. The link between originality and ownership, which often shapes the moral metaphors regarding “theft” related to discussions of plagiarism in the West, may not be as clear-cut in Chinese culture. This essay will examine the nature of this relationship between imitation and originality and how a different perspective on this relationship can affect both our attitudes toward plagiarism and how we teach our L2 students about plagiarism.

I became interested in this topic because of two incidents I experienced many years ago when I was teaching in China. I was teaching at a time when there were still few materials available to my students about current trends in composition pedagogy. My aunt had forwarded a copy of *College English* that contained Carolyn Matalene’s often cited and highly controversial article on contrastive rhetoric, which was based on her teaching experiences in China. I gave copies of this article to my students to read and respond to. That evening there was a knock on our door from a group of very agitated students, who were upset at what Matalene had said, particularly about how Chinese students do not seem to share a negative attitude toward plagiarism that she would expect to find. I would later tell this story to Alton Becker, who has written extensively on intercultural linguistics. His response was that when you tell someone they are different, they think you mean they are inferior, a topic that I will return to later.

The second incident I encountered illustrates how the basis of this controversy over plagiarism has its roots in the concepts of imitation and originality. During a visit to my father-in-law, who is a well-known professor of Western art in Guangzhou, I told him about an exhibit of a thousand years of Chinese art and how impressed I was with the continuity of the artworks across such a long period of time. He glared at me across the din-

ing room table and said, "There is nothing similar about them." What was imitation to me was highly original to him. My encounters with my students and my father-in-law have helped shape my view today that the answer to the question, "Is there a dichotomy between these two cultures in how they view imitation, originality, and plagiarism?" is always "maybe."

The Dichotomy and English-Language Learners

How we answer this question shapes how we view our students and their problems in negotiating the boundaries of plagiarism. Pennycook, for instance, raises a concern about whether the application of such concepts as plagiarism, which are deeply rooted in American economic life, might reflect a desire to impose Western values in contexts where they may not apply. Therefore, he argues that plagiarism can be seen as an act of resistance against the imposition of alien rules. In other cases, it may be seen as an act of survival where the risk of having the wrong idea outweighs the reward of having an original one. I have told the story of a Chinese student who admits to having plagiarized during the Cultural Revolution in order to be sure to have the correct political line, from which any deviation could result in severe penalties. His acts of imitation and plagiarism may be thought of as acts of political survival and therefore something to be admired (Bloch 218).

As most advocates of contrastive rhetoric would argue, differences in languages and attitudes do not normally imply a "deficit." However, resistance to the idea of a deficit, both in rhetorical and moral terms, seems to fade away when discussing plagiarism. Kubota, for example, has argued that focusing on cultural differences can cause students to feel negative about their own language and practices, as my students in China seemed to show. The consequences of this essentialism can be seen in how some teachers in the United States condescend to international students by assuming that they should not be held to the same standards as native speakers since they simply do not seem to "get it" in regard to plagiarism.

At the heart of these misunderstandings has been the assumption that originality and imitation are opposites in the same way that individualism and collectivism are. A Romantic view of artistic creation has led some to denigrate the value of imitation. In fact, Westerners memorize, imitate, and plagiarize all the time. Imitation in the form of using other peoples' ideas is seen in the West as intertextuality. Memory pervades everything we

say and write. As Alton Becker put it, “The history of our particular interactions, oral and written, builds each of us a domain of discourse, a constantly changing-drifting-domain of discourse in which we live and have an identity” (230). The recall of these memories can also be seen as an integral part of what it means to be literate. The precise ways in which such memories are used can vary greatly both across and within different genres of writing. In postmodern views of academic writing, we memorize the writings of the “giants” and use them in our papers to show that we have read them (ethos), that they agree with us (logos), and if they disagree, they either must be wrong or discussing something different (Latour).

Yet imitation continues to be associated primarily with so-called collectivistic cultures, such as China, which values the imitation of previous knowledge as an expression of the connection between past and present. This dichotomy between individualism and collectivity has been strongly challenged by many researchers in Chinese thought. Hall and Ames argue that individualism and collectivism are not mutually exclusive, but are both deeply integrated in Chinese culture. An individual in Chinese society can be concerned with herself as an individual and with the society at the same time. We can see the same in the Chinese rhetorical tradition. There is no question that Chinese learning emphasizes the imitation of traditional forms of intellectual property. Learning is shaped at an early age by the importance given in literacy instruction to memorizing characters and imitating the classic writings of the sages. Achieving literacy requires the rote memorization of characters. Chinese children are taught that it is not enough to learn to write; one must also imitate the traditional stroke order for every character. From this perspective, how Chinese writers appropriate texts is deeply inherent in Chinese culture.

The imitation of a common canon of texts, which is thought to be the source of much of the problem with plagiarism, may be culturally crucial, but it does not obviate the importance of critical thinking or personal expression. This same viewpoint has been found in Chinese rhetoric for the last three thousand years. For example, when Chinese children learn ancient T’ang poetry, they begin by memorizing the poetry. The Chinese believe that such memorization is a good exercise for the brain. By memorizing the rhymes, they can better understand their beauty. However, as my early encounter with my father-in-law showed me, the importance placed on imitation does not obviate the importance of originality. But what is meant by originality still may not be the same as it is in the West, and therefore what is meant by plagiarism may also not be the same.

The Chinese have often reflected on this question of imitation and originality. There is a Chinese saying, perhaps somewhat sarcastic, that goes

Memorizing three hundred poems from the Tang dynasty,
Even if you don't know how to write,
You can steal the pieces to write a poem.

How do we view creations such as these? An act of theft? An act of learning? An act of creation? Regardless of the answers, we can recognize in this saying our own Western concept of intertextuality. This saying also recognizes the value imitation has on the production of original knowledge. The rhetoric of imitation is also part of the Chinese form of epistemology, which can be seen in another saying, *Wen gu ru xin* (Review the old materials to gain a new perspective) that demonstrates how imitation can lead to originality rather than be a hindrance. We can see this traditional Chinese way of thinking reappear in contemporary thinking about intellectual property. The term *remixing*, which Lawrence Lessig has applied to how new forms of intellectual property are created from old forms, suggests the thought that all texts “remix” prior texts to create something new. Perhaps the Chinese approach to memorization and originality is not dramatically different from what is found in the West. Therefore, the importance given today to this intertextuality in all forms of writing has made it necessary to rethink attitudes toward plagiarism, especially as it applied to non-Western cultures.

Historicizing Cultural Differences

Scholars have shown that current ideas and practices related to intellectual property and plagiarism are socially constructed and therefore can change as social and economic factors change. We can see in historical studies of Chinese rhetoric that imitation is only one form of epistemology that Chinese thinkers could draw upon (Blinn and Garrett; Garrett). A study of traditional Chinese texts, even those written hundreds of years ago, can reveal how Chinese writers would imitate the classics, but at the same time extend their meaning and add their own voice (Henricks). Although textual attribution might be quite different, Chinese attitudes toward intertextuality and remixing have never been monolithic but have greatly varied across different periods and between different rhetoricians and philosophers.

The importance given to imitation has carried over into some, but not all, of the rhetorical systems traditionally found in Chinese literacy. The examination system for over a thousand years stressed the importance of memorizing and imitating classic texts, although this approach to education was never the only one that existed. Confucius's famous dictum, "I transmit rather than create," has often been cited, perhaps in an oversimplified manner, as referring to the appropriation of texts with no need for additional interpretation. Memorization and imitation, however, were not viewed as simply the recapitulation of ideas but rather as a fusion between the learner's process of thinking and that of the sages, as is any form of intertextuality. An individual in Chinese society can be concerned with herself as an individual and with the society at the same time, in the same way any writer can be concerned with both.

The complexity of this relationship between imitation and originality can be seen in the difficulty students can have in judging what constitutes plagiarism. The question a lawyer might ask about how much a piece of intellectual property has to be transformed before it is considered "original" is similar to the question the student might ask about whether a piece of text is considered plagiarized. Answers to students' questions about how much they can imitate before their writing is considered to be plagiarism or whether common knowledge must be cited revolve around attitudes toward intellectual property and plagiarism, which, in both China and the West, have been shaped by cultural, economic, and historical factors (Alford; Jaszi; Lunsford and Ede; Vaidhyanathan).

This connection between concepts of plagiarism and concepts of intellectual property can give researchers an important perspective for overcoming the often simplistic way cultural differences in plagiarism have been viewed. To Westerners, China appears to lack a sophisticated system for protecting intellectual property, which is then seen to be a cause of the apparent proclivity of Chinese students to commit plagiarism. If English-language learners do not agree that plagiarism is the same as the theft of real property (as the etymology of the word *plagiarism* as "kidnapping" suggests), then societies such as China will inevitably be viewed as "a nation of pirates." Should teachers feel, then, that Chinese culture encourages plagiarism in the same way the record and motion picture companies seem to feel Chinese culture encourages the theft of their songs and movies?

Looking at these issues in a historical context will show that these differences are not as wide as is often thought. As Alford points out, attempts to impose Western forms of intellectual property law in China were prob-

lematic because they did not attempt to account for “the character of Chinese political culture” (2). The idea of protecting the intellectual property of a “creative genius” has been considered at odds with the “collectivist” nature of Chinese society. Despite differences, there has been a recognition, as there has been in the West, of the author’s ownership of her intellectual property.

However, there are differences as well, which may be related to the greater emphasis placed on the community. Chinese intellectual property law has long been as concerned with the control of property as much as with the rights of individual authors (Alford 57). As is shown by the deals the Chinese government has cut with Yahoo and Google to limit access to online materials, the government has more often focused on the control of private property than on granting private property rights. The relationship between the individual and the society has never appeared to be as dichotomized as it is sometimes seen in the West (Mao).

Therefore, it can be said that neither intellectual property law nor attitudes toward plagiarism have developed in the same way in China as they have in the West. Bloch and Chi found that traditionally Chinese writers did not place as much importance on the attribution of source texts as their Western counterparts, although, as will be discussed below, the situation has recently been changing. The differences in such practices may cause some Chinese texts to be considered plagiarized by Western standards. Yet Bloch and Chi also found much similarity in the rhetorical purposes these citations were used for, indicating that these differences are not as pervasive as is often thought.

As Vaidhyanathan demonstrates, nineteenth-century America, which imported much of its intellectual property from England, had lax attitudes toward plagiarism, and the wholesale theft of intellectual property occurred, creating what we sometimes refer to, in regard to present-day China, as a “culture of plagiarism.” While we speak today, sometimes sarcastically, of a “plagiarism epidemic” among today’s students, research shows that plagiarism was extensive in the nineteenth-century American university (Berlin; Russell; Vecsey). Vaidhyanathan argues that new forms of intellectual property, such as the development of motion pictures and the domination of the United States in the world market, helped change attitudes toward the protection of intellectual property. At the same time, universities became more research oriented, and students were expected to emulate the intellectual work of their professors (Vecsey), which may have contributed to new attitudes toward plagiarism.

However, as the history of intellectual property and plagiarism indicates, these attitudes can change dramatically as the social and historical context changes. A historical study challenges the concept that attitudes toward plagiarism are somehow intrinsic to specific cultures. We can expect that attitudes toward plagiarism in both China and the West will shift as historical factors converge and become more homogenized, even as these factors may have diverged at other times. Therefore, as Howard argues, we should change our attitudes and policies toward plagiarism as we have changed our approaches toward teaching composition, especially in the age of the Internet, when new forms of online texts require new approaches to thinking about plagiarism (Howard, "Understanding," 11).

There have been similar changes in how plagiarism is viewed in China. In modern times, Chinese thinkers, perhaps influenced by the West or by changing contexts inside China, have become more reflective about this concept. Liang Shiqiu, a Western-educated Chinese academic, comments ironically about that Chinese perspective on the relationship between imitation, originality, and plagiarism:

Copying from a book is called "Plagiarism";
 Writing a book based on ten is called "Reference";
 Writing a book based on a hundred is called "Creation."

There have been obvious changes today in how plagiarism is viewed in Chinese academic society. While the pirating of intellectual property is still widespread, those segments of Chinese academia who wish to integrate themselves into Western cultural traditions are changing their attitudes toward plagiarism. For example, *Science* magazine, the official journal of the American Academy of Sciences, has reported a number of cases in the past decade of Chinese scientists caught plagiarizing (Li and Xiong). Over the same time, many American academics and journalists have also been caught. Therefore, it can be argued that neither society is more a culture of plagiarism than the other.

What is more interesting about these stories is how differently the accused have responded in each country. Li and Xiong report on a case of a scientific article considered to be plagiarized that had been submitted to a Western academic journal. The authors were not accused of stealing data but only the words of the English-language papers. Unlike Americans, who usually claim carelessness or memory lapses when accused of plagiarism, these Chinese academics, when confronted by their colleagues, readily

admitted that they had copied parts of the literature review but felt that “the charge of plagiarism is not valid because we have all the data” (Li and Xiong 337). They argued that they had not falsified or stolen data, which occurs frequently in scientific research; rather, because of their limited English, they had had to resort to copying to make their paper suitable for publication. It could be argued that because this paper had been published, the fresh data was sufficient to provide a new meaning for the text that was allegedly plagiarized.

The surprise that these Chinese academics felt toward these accusations of plagiarism can be seen as a reflection of changes in attitudes toward plagiarism, as well as changes in the goals of those Chinese academics who wish to move to the center of Western academic societies. To achieve these goals, Chinese academic may have to devalue previously held views about the relationship between imitation and originality. Neither the Chinese authorities who reported the incident nor the Western journal editor valued this process of “remixing” through which new meaning was created. In essence, despite the relevance of the authors’ findings, their process of memory and imitation was not valued, which put the authors in the same situation as if they had falsified or stolen their data.

It could be argued these scientists were guilty only of patch writing; that is, imitating the ideas of those who came before and then mixing in their own ideas as a means to become accepted as academic writers. However, they were not viewed in that way by their colleagues. This conflict over the relationship between imitation and originality also revealed changes in attitudes by the Chinese academics who blew the whistle on their colleagues. They seemed to feel that their own work would not be accepted in the West unless they adhered to Western standards regarding plagiarism. There have been parallel changes in the enforcement of Western forms of intellectual property law in China because of the government’s desire to enter the World Trade Organization.

We can see in the “crackdown” on academic plagiarism, like the “crackdown” on pirating software and DVDs, how attitudes are changing in China. Chinese academics, like Chinese government officials, seem to realize that if they want to play in the game, they have to play by the already established rules. Speaking of the Chinese molecular biologist who led the inquiry into the accusations of plagiarism of the scientific article, Robert Schilperoot, the editor of the journal *Plant Molecular Biology* where it was published, said, “I think he’s part of the new generation that is pushing hard to adapt Western standards” (Li and Xiong 337). Clearly, traditional

Chinese rhetorical standards, including the relationship between imitation and originality, were not thought good enough to be valued in the West.

As we come to recognize the contingent nature of plagiarism, we need to reframe the discussion on attitudes toward plagiarism across cultures. Chinese academics want to be accepted in Western academic communities, to be able to move from the periphery to the center (Lave and Wegner), which today means primarily publishing in English-language journals regardless of the writer's English-language ability. This tension between how Westerners view Chinese culture and how Chinese view their own culture is not new; it has existed for hundreds of years.

In conclusion, there is not today, nor ever has been, a single Chinese perspective on imitation, originality, and plagiarism, but, as I learned from my father-in-law, there is a different sense in how these concepts interact. Studying this relationship in a cross-cultural perspective reminds us of the danger of dichotomizing these concepts across cultures, so that only one culture is viewed as the "other." The result has often been an oversimplification of many aspects of the learning process—how students interact, how students think logically and critically, and even how they organize their papers, but the potentially most damaging effect can be found in how we understand the literacy practices of our students. At best, there has been a condescending attitude toward international students: that they should be treated differently because they don't know better. At worst, we have lost the opportunity to understand the complex learning strategies our students bring to the classroom.

If we place notions of intertextuality and remixing at the center of our teaching of writing, we can shift the debate away from moralistic approaches to plagiarism and toward a pedagogical one. Nonnative English speakers may still have problems negotiating the rules of plagiarism, but the problem is one of understanding the rules about how intertextuality is treated, not of obeying moral precepts. Moreover, when their process of imitation does not yield the desired result, their problems can be seen more as a language issue than a moral one. As Becker puts it, the process of entering into a new culture is one of confronting the "silences" of the new culture with the memories one brings along.

Plagiarism is similarly a problem of language. After all, these rules that govern plagiarism, like any set of rules, are never monolithic or static. They can vary across different genres and different writing contexts, but most importantly, the more complex the rule, the more it needs to be taught so that everyone can play on a level playing field. This perspective can help

both researchers and teachers develop a framework for discussing plagiarism and developing pedagogies for teaching about plagiarism that helps our L2 students understand its subtleties and contradictions, as well as the reasons why the rules exist in the first place, in the same way they learn about any other aspect of literacy.

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