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PLAGIARISM ACROSS CULTURES: IS THERE A DIFFERENCE?

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Abstract

Trying to define plagiarism has been one of the most controversial issues in L2 writing classes. Much of the discussion has been about the relationship between how plagiarism is viewed in China and in the West, in part because there is a long, shared literacy tradition between them. This paper argues that while there are critical differences between how plagiarism is viewed, the relationship is often more complex than is sometimes thought. A study of this relationship can help us understand not only the nature of plagiarism but also concepts of imitation, originality, and authorship, which underlie how plagiarism is viewed. While the focus of this paper is on a comparison of Chinese- and English-language viewpoints, this perspective can help both researchers develop a framework for examining plagiarism across cultures and for teachers to develop a pedagogy for teaching about plagiarism that helps our students see its subtleties and contradictions involved in thinking about plagiarism in the same way they learn about any other aspect of literacy.

Keywords: plagiarism, intercultural rhetoric, contrastive rhetoric, authorship, rhetoric

INTRODUCTION

The first part of my title "Plagiarism Across Cultures" raises a question that has been fiercely debated for many years in the field of L2 composition, particularly in an area of research called contrastive or intercultural rhetoric. This area of research has attempted to study how a student's first language and home culture may affect their second language writing, including their attitudes towards plagiarism (e.g. Bloch, 2001; Deckert, 1993; Fox, 1994; Matalene, 1985; Pennycook, 1996; Scollon, 1995). The question raised in the second part of my title – "Is There a Difference" is the more controversial part since it is this question about cultural difference that has raised emotional issues, charges and counter

charges about racism and about otherness and essentialism (e.g. Kubota & Lerner, 2004) that transcends normal pedagogical issues that L2 composition teachers usually face in regard to using a student's first language in a second language composition course. If you couple this with the general controversies around plagiarism - how does it reflect the way we teach, our obligations and attitudes to our students, and the position of our classes in the university (e.g. Angélil-Carter, 2000; Bloch, 2001; Howard, 1999; Pecorari, 2001) then we can truly see how this topic has evolved into the minefield it has become today.

Much of the research cited above has examined possible cross-cultural differences among English-language learners whose first language is Chinese. In Chinese society the relationship among these terms has long been controversial. This interest can be attributed in part to the significance of the issue that has resulted from the large number of Chinese-speaking students who are learning English and in part because China has a tradition of literacy that exceeds the tradition in Western societies. I became interested in the 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 about current trends in teaching composition. My aunt had forwarded my mail to me, which included a copy of *College English* that contained Carolyn Matalene's (1985) often cited and much maligned article on contrastive rhetoric, based on her teaching experiences in China. I gave copies of this article to the 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 the fact that Chinese students do not seem to share a negative attitude towards plagiarism that she would expect to find, and I would later tell this story to Alton Becker, who has written extensively on intercultural linguistics (e.g. 1998, 1991). He responded that when you tell someone they are different, they think you mean they are inferior, a topic that I will return later.

The second incident I encountered a few weeks later I feel gets to the heart of this controversy about plagiarism. We went to visit my father-in-law, who is a well-known professor of Western Art in Guangzhou. I told him how we had seen an exhibit of a thousand years of Chinese art and how impressed I was with the continuity and similarity of the pieces across such as time span. He glared at me across the dining room table and said, "There is nothing similar about them." His reply goes to the heart of the controversy over cross-cultural plagiarism: What is the relationship between imitation and originality? What was imitation to me was highly original to him.

CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN HOW PLAGIARISM IS VIEWED

My encounter with my father-in-law helped shape my view that the answer to the question "Is there a dichotomy between these two cultures?" is a qualified yes. In both China and the West, there has been tradition that has viewed plagiarism, as well as corresponding issues in the development of the idea of intellectual property, from cultural and historical perspectives. Research by Alford (1995), Jaszi, (1994) Woodmansee (1994), Lunsford and Ede (1994), Rose (1993), and Vaidyanathan (2001) on how intellectual property law and plagiarism is historically situated in social, economic, as well as cultural factors means to me that it is inevitable that there has to be some difference since the development of attitudes towards both intellectual property and plagiarism may be different, as Alford points in his discussion of intellectual property law in China. The relationship between attitudes towards plagiarism and romanticism at the end of the 18th century, which has been cited as a critical factor in the development of our modern views of plagiarism, were clearly not duplicated in China. But that does not mean that the Western and Chinese views of plagiarism differ. Vaidynathan's study of intellectual property and plagiarism also offers an interesting viewpoint**.** In the 19th century, when America imported much of its intellectual property from England, attitudes towards plagiarism were lax, creating, as we sometimes refer to China today, as a "Culture of Plagiarism." While we speak of a "plagiarism epidemic" today (e.g. Marsh, 2004), Russell's (1988) and Berlin's (1991) studies of 19th century composition teaching find that plagiarism was often rampant in American universities.

However, as Vaidyanathan (2001) argues, by the end of the 19th century and with the development in the 20th century of new forms of intellectual property that were economically dominated by the US, such as the motion picture industry, attitudes towards intellectual property began to change. Plagiarism, likewise, began to be taken more seriously, leading up to today when fair use is being squeezed because of fears of the American record and motion picture industries that the Internet will facilitate wholesale theft of their intellectual property. In parallel, there has been the growth of plagiarism detection sites like *Turnitin.com* (www.turnitin.com) that advertise themselves as the antidotes to the plagiarism epidemic that the Internet is seen as similarly facilitating.

Intellectual property law developed differently in China, as did attitudes towards plagiarism. As Alford (1995) argues, attempts to implement intellectual property law have not taken hold because they did not take into account the indigenous laws and institutions when attempting to impose Western forms of intellectual property. But Alford also shows the

problematic nature of this attempt does not mean that there has been no attempt by the Chinese government to develop a system of intellectual property laws, as is sometimes portrayed in discussions of plagiarism. In fact, for over a thousand years, Chinese governments have attempted to impose some form of law, although the goals may differ from those found in the West, particularly in regard to thinking about intellectual property as private property, which underlies our modern concepts of plagiarism. As the recent deals the Chinese government has cut with Yahoo and Google about limiting access to online materials show, the Chinese government's focus has been more with the control is more concerned with the control of private property than with private property rights, which Alford argues is consistent with traditions of Chinese thought dating back to Mencius.

If, in fact, there is this inevitability, is there any justification for concern my students, my father-in-law, and many researchers have expressed over this dichotomy. The answer is also yes. These concerns are important to account for in shaping how we view the gap from both theoretical and pedagogical concerns. Pennycook (1996), for instance, raised the concern of how such concepts, deeply rooted in American economic life and the desire to impose these laws all over the world, as the recent controversy over Napster, Grokster, and all forms of peer-to-peer exchange of intellectual property have shown.

Pennycook has questioned why people learning English within their own cultures should be subjected to the same rules that native speakers or those learning in the culture where the rules were developed follow if, in fact, there are these contradictions among the different cultures. Pennycook argues that an act of plagiarism can be seen as an act of resistance against the imposition of these alien rules and thus be viewed as an affirmation of Howard's argument that plagiarism can reflect an expression of collaboration and intertextuality that could be viewed in a more positive way, not just as a learning experience but as a form on textuality in itself.

There is a justifiable danger, too, in these charges of "otherness" and "essentialism" as well. Kubota (1998) has argued that focusing on such differences can cause students to feel negatively about their own language and cultural practices, as my students in China seemed to show. We can see some of this in the sometimes condescending attitudes of teachers in the United States have towards the "otherness" of these students. At best, there is often an attitude expressed that international students should not be held to the same standards as native speakers since international students simply do not seem to get it because they are from different cultures that may not value the morality of our norms regarding theft.

If English language learners truly do not share the Western conceptualization of plagiarism, and if our concept of plagiarism is akin to

the stealing of property, as even the etymology of the word "plagiarism" as meaning "kidnapping" suggests, then shouldn't societies such as China be places that do not share our supposedly more enlightened view of intellectual property, being viewed as a nation of pirates. Therefore, 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?

As most advocates of intercultural rhetoric would argue, a dichotomy does not imply a deficit, but in the case of plagiarism, it often seems to. Because of the moralism often attached to the use of the "stealing" metaphor in regard to plagiarism, Chinese attitudes towards plagiarism are often seen as resulting from a moral problem reflecting differences in attitudes towards intellectual property. The Chinese appear to Westerners to not only lack the sophisticated system of intellectual property that we do, hence the proclivity of Chinese students to commit plagiarism but also Chinese thinking is mired down in memorization and imitation, thus lacking the kind of logical inquiry favored in the West.

The roots of this argument are thought to lie within the depths of Chinese rhetorical traditions, particularly with the role of memorization and imitation. In this perspective, Chinese learning is seen to rely on memorizing characters and imitating the classic writings of the sages. The result is that through memory and imitation, there is a fusion between one's own process of thinking and that of the sages. As Thomas Metzger (1985) argues, in Confucian thinking, there is little reflexivity, using such terms as "in my view" (*wo-i*) that differentiates one's own view from that of the sages. Confucius' famous dictum "I transmit rather than create" has often been cited, perhaps oversimplified, as referring to the appropriation of texts with no need for additional interpretation.

Teachers have often jumped on this view to justify their views of plagiarism in Chinese society (e.g. Matalene, 1985). The problem that Western educators have with Chinese students is that the students not only do not understand these Western concepts but seem to feel that such plagiarism is an acceptable practice. And sometimes this view is true. Bloch (2002) tells 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. In this case imitation and plagiarism may be thought to be an act of political survival and therefore something to be admired.

While we often reject such imitation as being unoriginal, we, in fact, practice it all the time. Our attitudes towards memorization, imitation and plagiarism vary. As Mark Twain, the famous American writer and strong advocate of intellectual property law, put it,

> Oh, dear me, how unspeakably funny and owlishly idiotic and grotesque what that "plagiarism" farce. As if there was much of anything in human utterance, oral or written except plagiarism (cited in Vaidhyanathan, 2001).

Imitation in the form of using other peoples' ideas of course is seen in the Western concepts of intertextuality. Memory pervades everything we say and write. As Becker put it, every sentence contains the memories or other sentences. It can also be seen as an integral part of what it means to be literate. 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 use (*logos*), and if they disagree, they either must be wrong or discussing something different.

This same viewpoint has been found in Chinese rhetoric for the last 3000 years (Bloch, 1996). For example, when Chinese children learn ancient T'ang poetry, much like American children learn the piano, 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. As my early encounter with my father-in-law showed me, the importance placed on imitation does not obviate the importance of originality. They are not dichotomous. But what is meant by originality may not be the same, and therefore what is meant by plagiarism may also not be the same.

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

> Memorizing 300 poems from Tang dynasty,
> Even if you don't know how to write,
> You can steal the pieces to write poem.

How do we view creations such as these? Are they acts of stealing or a means of learning? Regardless, we can recognize in this saying our own Western concepts of intertextuality. It is this concept of intertextuality, both between writer and writer, and writer and text, as Howard (1999) has argued, is a critical issue in our view of how plagiarism is defined.

There is also a recognition of value imitation has to the production of original knowledge. The rhetorical process involved in process of imitation is also part of the Chinese form of epistemology; that is, how they view the creation of knowledge. There is another Chinese saying "*Wen gu ru xin*" (review the old materials to gain a new perspective), that indicates how imitation can lead to originality rather, as we sometimes believe, is a

hindrance. This relationship between rhetoric and epistemology has long been the hallmark of Western theories of composition (e.g. Berlin, 1988). Bloch and Chi (1995) found that the key difference between Chinese and English texts was in how the texts were cited, what Green (2002) calls the norms of attribution. Norms of attribution are important in the West, as the plagiarism cases of Stephen Ambrose and Doris Kearns have shown. Traditional Chinese rhetoric had different patterns of attribution. The classic texts, often well known by all readers, were felt unnecessary to cite. This is an important difference but not one that redefines what is meant by plagiarism. A different view of plagiarism does not mean there is no view of plagiarism.

To use the term Lessing (2004) has applied to intellectual property, all texts "remix" prior texts to create something new. As Lessing's work shows, how we view this remixing is not so much a concern with what was taken but with what was created. But that is not just a Western concept. Chinese academics, perhaps influenced by the West or by changing contexts inside China, have similarly reflected on this concept. In this citation from Liang Shiqiu, a Western-educated Chinese academic, there is a sense of irony 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".

At the same time, the historical study of plagiarism and intellectual property challenges the concept that our attitudes towards plagiarism are somehow intrinsic to how we define culture. That is the problem with how we view the concept of culture in the larger view of what we call intercultural rhetoric. The term "culture" always seems to refer to things hard-wired into our consciousness, like memes or packets of DNA that pass down from generation to generation, which while not necessarily being deterministic, heavily influences our behavior.

However, history can be viewed as changeable and by uncovering the past in regard to plagiarism, we may find that what we may have thought to be universal across time, perhaps has dramatically changed, and therefore attitudes may shift as the historical factors converge and perhaps homogenized. While understanding what people are currently thinking is important to functioning in a society, history teaches us that these ideas and practices are socially constructed and 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 (e.g. Blinn & Garrett, 1993). If we look at Chinese texts, we can also see ways that Chinese writers could imitate the classics, but at the same time extend their meaning and add their own voice. That is not to say there are no critical differences in such areas as how texts are attributed, but it shows that Chinese attitudes towards intertextuality were not monolithic but varied across different periods and between different scholars. Therefore, as Howard (1999) argues, we can change our attitudes towards plagiarism as we change our attitudes towards teaching composition.

This view of plagiarism can also help us focus on how concepts of plagiarism are changing in China as well as in other parts of the world in sometimes controversial ways. For example, *Science* magazine, the official journal of the American Academy of Sciences, has reported a number of cases over the years of Chinese scientists being caught plagiarizing (e.g. Li & Xiong, 1996). Over the same time, there have obviously been many cases of American academics and journalists similarly being caught. However, what has intrigued me about these stories is how they are different from cases we often see in American academic life. Li and Xiong report on a case of plagiarism of an article considered to be plagiarized that had been submitted to a Western academic journal. Unlike Americans, who usually claim carelessness or memory lapses when accused of plagiarism, the Chinese academics when confronted by other Chinese academics with charges of plagiarism, readily admitted they copies parts of the literature review but that the charge of "plagiarism is not valid 'because we have all the data." They did not falsify or steal data, which frequently occur in academic research as witnessed by a myriad of cases over the last few years, but what these scientists did in the 30% of their paper was to imitate the writing, what Hull and Rose (1989) called "trying on the language" and then added their own data.

It could be argued that because this paper had been published, the data was sufficient to provide a new meaning for the text that was allegedly plagiarized. However, it is clear that both the Chinese authorities who reported this and the Western journal editor did not value the process through which this new meaning was created. In essence, one could say that we do not value the process of memory and imitation that was found in this paper, despite the relevance of the authors' findings. However, just as interesting are the changes in attitudes expressed by the Chinese academics who blew the whistle on their colleagues, seeming to feel that their work would not be accepted in the West unless they adhered to Western standards, which is also parallel to changes in intellectual property law that have been occurring in China as a result of the Chinese desire to enter the World Trade Organization (WTO).

There is much to be said about how the relationship between Eastern and Western concepts of plagiarism and these differences can be framed by a discussion of imitation and originality. We could argue that what these scientists did was to what is called patchwriting (Howard, 1999; Hull & Rose, 1989), imitating the ideas of those who came before – the sages of their field – and mixing in or remixing their own ideas. Clearly, the Chinese scientists plagiarized by most Western standards but how should we judge what they did – Stealing, Resisting, Learning, Creating? We cannot ignore here the power of change, as any study of history teaches us and one that the ancient Taoists taught.

As we shift from looking at plagiarism as an intrinsic cultural factor passed down from generation to generation but as a historical factor that can change and evolve in response to changes in the society, we need to compare cultures in different ways as well. We can see in the "crackdown" on plagiarism, like the "crackdown" on pirating, how those changes are taking place. Speaking of the Chinese molecular biologist who led the inquiry into the accusations of plagiarism, the editor of the journal where the article was published said, "I think he's part of the new generation that is pushing hard to adapt Western standards." Clearly Chinese standards are not good enough. This tension that results from these changes in Chinese attitudes can be viewed as progressive, even when it contradicts traditional Chinese thinking.

These academics want to be accepted in the Western academic community - what Lave and Wegner (1991) call being able to move from the peripheral to the center, which today clearly refers to publishing in English for an English-speaking audience. We can see the same thing in the realm of intellectual property – the almost celebratory mood of the Chinese when they were accepted into the WTO organization, at the price of having to protect American intellectual property interests from pirating. This tension is not new – it has existed for the last two hundred years if not longer. What is more difficult to do is evaluate what these changes mean. Whether these academics are part of a "new generation" or whether the scientists accused of plagiarized were victimized by what Phillipson (1992) calls "linguistic imperialism" is a matter left to other discussions.

There is not, 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 with each other. But, that does not mean there is a dichotomy. There are other areas where this transcendence of the dichotomy can be seen. Bloch (2001) wrote that the development of the Internet, particularly that of peer to peer exchange of intellectual property, would move our concept of intellectual plagiarism more towards the historical Chinese view of intellectual property and

plagiarism, better reflecting Lessing's concept of "remixing." This view has proved to be premature and naïve. Nevertheless, the significance of an intercultural approach to plagiarism is not that we can throw out our concern but that we need to rethink how we conceptualize plagiarism in the classroom**.**

CONCLUSION

The study of Chinese rhetoric reminds us of the danger of dichotomizing concepts of memory, imitation, and originality across cultures can oversimplify the complexity of these concepts, so that one culture is only viewed as the "other." The result has often been an over simplification of many aspects of the learning process – how students interact with each other, how students think logically and critically, and how they even organize their papers, but the potentially most damaging effect in the view of how other cultures view plagiarism and how it needs to be dealt with. At best there has been a condescending attitude towards international students: that they should be treated differently because they do not know better. At worst, we have lost the opportunity to understand the complex learning strategies our students are bringing to the classroom

Changing our view of towards plagiarism challenges some of the moralistic approaches to plagiarism that have often dominated our discussions and our teaching. Understanding about plagiarism is an integral part of understanding the nature of whatever type of literacy English-language learners are asked to use, whether creative writing, essay writing, or academic writing. Our international students may still have problems negotiating the rules of plagiarism but the problem is one of understanding rules, not moral precepts. The moral viewpoint has often frustrated teachers who, despite warning their students not to plagiarize, find them doing the same thing over and over again.

Rules, on the other hand, whether they have to do with academic writing or playing football, need to be taught and we have to be sure that they are understood so everyone can play on a level field. This perspective can help both researchers develop a framework for examining plagiarism across cultures and for teachers to develop pedagogy for teaching about plagiarism that helps our students see its subtleties and contradictions involved in thinking about plagiarism in the same way they learn about any other aspect of literacy.

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