How is research on academic plagiarism in China conducted? A preliminary investigation of the recent change in the style of writing in an academic journal

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Abstract This paper reports on the findings from a study on an academic journal – *Academics in China*. The journal, launched in 1986, is representative of academic journals in China in the field of the humanities and social sciences. It deals with the issue of academic plagiarism and other forms of academic corruption. By analysing articles about academic plagiarism published in this journal in 1999, 2000, 2004 and 2008, it provides statistics and analysis on the perception of Chinese academics about plagiarism within Chinese academe. It found that open discussion about academic plagiarism and other academic corruption in China dramatically increased after 2000 as: (1) the number of articles dealing with academic plagiarism in this period increased dramatically compared to the previous period, and (2) more authors were concerned about this issue than they were before 2000. Although much concern has been raised about this issue since the mid 1990s, no empirical study seems to have been conducted on plagiarism by Chinese academics.

Key Ideas

- The increasing concern of Chinese academics for academic plagiarism and other academic issues is an important part of the transition of a society from a planned economy to a market economy
- The transition of Chinese academics including the style of Chinese scholarship is not obvious although an increasing concern for the issue mentioned has arisen
- The study of academic plagiarism and other forms of academic corruption by Chinese academics are more subjective rather than objective, thus less empirical study on the issues mentioned has been carried out
- The unpreparedness and low quality of Chinese academics to conduct studies on the issue of plagiarism led to the current situation of Chinese scholarship on these issues

Discussion Question 1 Is there a convergence between academic conventions in the West and those in China?

Discussion Question 2 How do Chinese academics define academic plagiarism?

Introduction

Since the mid 1990s, Chinese academics became more and more aware of the incompatibility of their style of writing with that of the West. As Chinese academics have become increasingly integrated into the outside world, more knowledge products such as academic articles and monographs come out and are put under the spotlight to be critically reviewed. While this has promoted more effective communication between Chinese academics and their foreign counterparts, especially their Western counterparts, an accusation that Chinese academics are committing plagiarism has emerged like a phantom. This is also caused by the attention that has been paid to plagiarism committed by the increasing cohort of international students at Western campuses, that is, Chinese overseas students as more and more Chinese students go overseas to pursue qualifications.[1] While new studies on the perspectives of Chinese scholars within China has emerged in recent years, much of the scholarship on the issue of plagiarism within Chinese academe mainly deals with exposing the incidents of plagiarism, and for providing reasons for explaining this phenomenon.[2] However, less attention has paid to how the research on the issue of plagiarism has been carried out by these studies. This paper is the first – at least in the literature in English – to discuss the change of writing style in the articles about academic plagiarism in a scholastic journal in China.

Existing Views on Plagiarism: Definition

According to Joel Bloch, "plagiarism cannot always be clearly defined": it can variously be defined as "taking entire paper and passing them off as their own", "taking pieces of texts and not properly paraphrasing or acknowledging them",[3] and "reusing papers that the students has written herself".[4] A quick and easy way to define plagiarism is "using the work of others as it were one's own"[5] A typical definition of plagiarism employed by Chinese academics is "to take the whole or

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[1] See Myers Sharon, "Questioning Author (ity): ESL/EFL, Science, and Teaching about plagiarism", *Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TESL-EJ)*, vol.3, no.2, 1998pp.1-19; Colin Sowden, "Plagiarism and the Culture of Multilingual Students in Higher Education Abroad", *ELT Journal*, vol.59, no.3, July 2005, pp.226-233; Liu, Dilin, "Plagiarism in ESOL Students in Cultural Conditioning Truly the Major Culprit?" *ELT Journal*, vol. 59/3, July 2005, pp.234-241; Chris Shei, "Plagiarism, Chinese Learners and Western Conventions", available at: www.geocities.com/cc**shei**/publication/**Plagiarism**.pdf accessed August 31 2009

[2] See Li Peishan (李佩珊) & Xue Pangao (薛攀皋), "Is It an Issue of English Language of Morality?" (*Shi Yingwen wenti haishi daode wenti*是英文问题还是道德问题？), *Journal of Dialectics of Nature*, vol.104, no.4, 1996, pp.74-80; Zhu, Xuemei(朱雪梅), "Academic Corruption and the Reconstruction of Academic Establishment" *(xueshu fubai yu xueshu zhidu de chongjian*学术腐败与学术制度的重建*)*, *Social Science Forum*, No 5, 2004, pp.47-49

[3] Joel Bloch, "Review of the book: Standing *in the shadow of giants: plagiarists, authors, collaborators* by Rebecca Howard" *Academic Writing*, December 10 2001, available at: *http://wac.colostate.edu/aw/reviews/howard_2001.htm*, accessed on 30 October, 2006

[4] Ronald B Standler, 2000, cited in Joel Bloch, 2001

[5] Ben Rosamond, "Plagiarism, Academic Norms and the Governance of the Profession", *Politics*, vol.22, no.33, 2002, pp.167-174

part of others' writing as one's own work to publish."[6] So in terms of academic conventions, the definition of plagiarism both in China and the West is very similar. This study adheres to Bloch's definition, and also borrows the following three aspects from Chris Shei, who usefully defines plagiarism with a mix of Chinese and Western elements:

- Blatant Stealing: scholars and students may produce written works totally identical to resource texts, paragraphs and sentences and submit as his/her own without any editing or with little editing.
- Inadvertent copying: this may occur when many students and academics don't know academic conventions and norms especially in referencing
- Integrated borrowing: this involves students and scholars following existing texts very closely in content, wording, structure, style and so on.[7]

Literature Review

In the context of Chinese academe, plagiarism is a recently talked-about topic, and usually has been understood as an aspect of academic criticism. For example, in the articles investigated in the case journal *Academics in China*, allegations of plagiarism were categorized and put under the column title "Academic Criticism". As Li Cunshan pointed out, there existed a situation of abnormality (*Qiqiao*'蹊跷') in academic criticism because the response of an author to such criticism of their work should really be published in the same journal, but actually is not. This happens in the journal *Academics in China*, which is acclaimed as one of the journals in China that is most successful in the field of academic norms and academic criticism. This acclaim appears largely because few other academic journals in China have set up such a direct opportunity for academics to carry out direct and candid attacks against plagiarism and other academic malpractice.[8]

Many commentators have remarked on the low profile of academic criticism in China in terms of a discipline or area of research. It is rare that academics working in universities and research institutions are self-reflective of the importance of issues relating to the proper conduct of academic criticism. Even in recent times many academics have not diverged from what they did several years ago. For example, they still engage in disclosing the incidents of plagiarism rather

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[6] Chen Mingfang (陈明芬), "Worrying Phenomenon of Plagiarism, --Talking from the Bitter Experience of My Work *Cliff-Burial in China*" (*lingren youlu de piaoqie xianxiang - cong zhuozhu <zhongguo de guanxian muzang> de zaoyu tanqi* 令人忧虑的剽窃现象 –从拙著<中国的棺悬墓葬>的遭遇谈起), *Journal of Yunmeng*, vol. 24, no. 6, 2003, p.15

[7] Chris Shei, 2006

[8] Li Cunshan(李存山), "The 'Bizarre' of Academic Criticism" (*xueshu piping de 'qiqiao'*学术批评的"蹊跷"), *Social Sciences Forum*, no.5, 2005, pp.41-43

than in analysing the phenomenon.[9] Even though they are an important part of the process of knowledge production, academic journals are seldom critiqued within academic circles. Jiyuan Ye is one among the few Chinese scholars who undertook relatively comprehensive research on the issue. Based on the results from his investigation, Ye believed that academics have already realized the importance of academic journals in transmitting information relating to academic matters, have paid attention to assimilating the latest research contribution of other scholars, and have changed the situation of relying too much on books and neglecting academic journals. Ye also claimed that too many repetitions in the content of academic journals, as well as too little original content, indicated a lack of academic journals in the fields of interdisciplinary studies, and the underdevelopment of the type of academic journal that focused on academic criticism.[10] But I would argue that an increase in scholars paying attention to academic journal articles is not an action likely to enhance the quality of research, but is instead driven by the pursuit of personal interests, such as getting promotion by writing and publishing more articles. Chinese academics have not been trained strictly in how to do research, how to do referencing, and how to avoid plagiarism. Thus they have to find ways to escape moral condemnation because more and more academic journals are making it a requirement that their authors should abide by academic conventions and avoid academic malpractices such as plagiarism.

Methodology

This study mainly adopts a text analysis of selected articles to investigate the change in style of writing, in order to see how Chinese academics conduct their research work, especially studies on academic plagiarism in an academic journal. Two pairs of articles from four years respectively are selected to make a comparison. I selected one academic journal from thousands of academic journals from the fields of the humanities and social sciences – *Academics in China* (学术界) based on the following criteria:

- it is based in Central China, geographically close to developed eastern coastal area;
- it is one of the key journals in the national journal ranking system (it received its high status in 2002); and

[9] Yu Zhaoping(俞兆平), "Attention Should Be Paid to the Phenomenon of Plagiarism in PhD Theses" (*boshi lunwen de chaoxi xianxiang yinggai yinqi zhongshi*博士论文的抄袭现象应该引起重视), *Academics in China*, no.4, vol.131, 2008, pp.88-93

[10] Ye Jiyuan (叶继元), "An Investigation and Analysis on Academic Journals in Humanities and Social Sciences and the Appraisal of Research Achievement " (*renwen shehui kexue xueshu qikan ji yanjiu chengguo pingjia de diaocha fenxi*人文社会科学学术期刊及研究成果评价的调查分析), *Academics in China*, no.4, vol.125, 2007, p.66-67

- it has a column under the title of 'Academic Criticism' which provides a platform for whistleblowers to expose incidents of plagiarism and other academic malpractices.

I chose articles from the years 1999, 2000, 2004 and 2008 because the year 2000 was a hallmark for the development of this journal. This was the year when the journal first changed its layout format since it was launched in 1986 (only one issue was published in that year. After 1986, it became a bi-monthly issued academic journal except in 1990. In 1990, 4 issues were published). The decision to choose two articles respectively from 2004 and 2008 was based on the fact that a national code of conduct about carrying out academic activities was promulgated in June of 2004, which was regarded as the result of the discussion about academic normalization since the mid-1990s, and which indicates the formalization of the rules and norms applied to academic activities advocated by those scholars active during the discussion.[11]

Changing policies and the increase in articles talking about academic plagiarism in this journal

Articles in this journal before 2000 dealing with the issue of academic criticism, plagiarism and other malpractices within academe were rare. There were only two articles mentioning these issues in 1999, while in 2000 the number of such articles rocketed to thirty one (See table 1 below). This is a dramatic change in terms of dealing with academic criticism in a provincial journal.

Table 1: Change of articles talking about plagiarism and other academic issues in China in *Academics in China* from 1999 to 2008

Year / Item	1999	2000	2001	2004	2008
Number of articles on plagiarism, academic criticism, etc.	2	31	30	26	28
Percentage of such articles to the whole numbers of articles in this Journal in that year (%)	1.5	16.0	12.3	11.2	10.2

[11] Ye Jiuan(叶继元), "Academic Journals and Academic Norms" (*xueshu qikan yu xueshuguifan* 学术期刊和学术规范), *Academics in China*, vol.113, no.4, 2005, pp.57-68

The drastic change in interest from this journal resulted from the policy change made by the editorial board. According to Yuan Yuli, the editor-in-chief, the driving force of this change was the combination of a low circulation of the journal and the cutting down of fiscal assistance from local government.[12] Thus in 1999 the editorial board of the journal decided to make some changes, the most notable being the change to the journal layout from issue number one in 2000. The most relevant aspect of the policy change of the journal to my topic is that a new column – "Academic Criticism" – was set up, which includes topics of plagiarism and other academic malpractices that only rarely appeared in other academic journals. This was a "shock" to academic readership. It was not long after the layout change that the journal fast gained recognition not only provincially but nationally. For example, it was listed as one of the key academic journals in one national journal ranking system in 2002. And this is the most noteworthy change brought by the journal.

But seen in a broader perspective, more aspects can explain the change of the journal layout. One aspect is that the change of journal's new format coincided with the debate among Chinese academics on issues such as academic normalization from the mid 1990s – which mainly focused on the need for academics to be subject to and abide by academic norms and conventions when writing academic papers, articles and carrying out other academic activities. This debate was carried out against the background of concerns from academics about the quality of their knowledge products.[13] Thus, layout format change and the setting up new column titles such as "Academic Criticism" within this particular journal was the corollary of the debate and discussion.

Secondly, the change to the journal was also the result of the effect of pioneering economic reform in China eventually being expanded to other industries. For example, reform in bureaucracies at central governmental level in 1998 – mainly tackling the problem of redundancy in the central governmental organization – brought enormous shocks to those formerly regarded to be powerful and prestigious in the social strata. Almost at the same time, similar changes to bureaucracy happened to those working in educational and cultural institutions. As a publication, *Academics in China* confronted similar challenges, such as the warning of decrease of funds from fiscal assistance.[14] This made those who previously had worked in a comfortable way consider changing their way of doing things.

Thirdly, education policy changes play an important role in the changing environment of academe, including in the publication sector. The drastic change of education policy in higher education institutions, especially the expansion of the enrolment in undergraduate and postgraduate programs after 1998, exerted

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[12] Yuan Yuli (袁玉立), "The Misleading of Academic Journals - Concurrently on Development of Individual Styles of Academic Forum" (*xueshu qikan yao zouchu 'xueshu' wuqu –jianyi <xueshujie> jinhou fazhan de gexing fengge* 学术期刊要走出"学术"误区——兼议《学术界》今后发展的个性风格), *Academics in China*, vol.77, no.4, 1999, pp.87-91

[13] Yu, Sanding(余三定), "Diachronic Review on Academic Norm Discussing in the New Era" (*xingshiqi xueshu guifan taolun de lishixing pingshu*, 新时期学术规范的历时性评述), *Journal of Yunmeng*, vol.26, no.1, 2005, pp.5-11

[14] Yuan Yuli, p.87

a very profound effect on academics and scholars working in these institutions. Those defined as workers in cultural ventures or units had experienced a round of reform in their professional assessment, promotion and recruitment. Academic journal publication had an important part of this knowledge production chain (research and higher education, etc.) and could not escaped from any shocks from the policy change. Before this year, knowledge workers were not assessed by the standards borrowed from business units or enterprises, so their position were more secure, similar to the tenure system in Western countries. After 1998, they have had to face a different situation. This was a mechanism adopted by the Chinese government to meet the requirement of China's coming participation into the World Trade Organization in 2001. It was also regarded as increasingly important that Chinese academics should be pushed to more effectively communicate with their foreign colleagues. More and more academic exchanges between Chinese academics and foreign academics, especially their Western counterparts, were therefore carried out from the last half of the 1990s.[15]

What change happened to the style of writing?

In order to make clear the difference between the styles of writing in academic journal articles before and after the layout change of the journal, the four articles that are chosen above are grouped in two pairs. One pair includes one issue (number 4) of 1999;[16] and one (number 2) of 2000.[17] The other pair has two of 2001 and 2008 respectively. Some features of these articles can be seen in table 2 below.

Table 2: Different style of writing in four articles chosen from 1999, 2000, 2001 and 2008

	Article 1(1999)	Article 2(2000)	Article 3(2001)	Article 4(2008)
Abstract	√	√	√	√
Keywords	√	√	√	√
Abstract in English	√	×	×	×
Author information on front page	×	√	√	√
In-text citation	×	√	×	√
Footnotes	×	√	√	×
Bibliography	×	×	×	×

[15] Huang Futao, "Policy and Practice of the Internationalization of Higher Education in China", *Journal of Studies in International Education*, no.3, vol.7, 2003, pp.225-240

[16] Yuan Yuli, 1999, pp.87-91

[17] Wu Tieping(伍铁平), "The New Edition of 'Three People Becomes a Tiger' — 'Dover Strait' became 'Dover Street' and the Lesson"('sanren chenghu' xinban – '*duofuer haixia' biancheng 'duofu dajie' jiqi* jiaoxun "三人成虎"新版 —"多佛尔海峡"变成"多佛大街"及其教训, *Academics in China*, vol.81, no.2, 2000, pp.151-156

The article in 1999 was written by the editor-in-chief of the journal. He mainly deals with the necessity to make a change to the layout format. This article is chosen by the reason that it was the only article in this journal to demonstrate the attitude of the editorial board towards its layout change. Thus it has laid the foundation for the release of the following three articles. The article in 2000 is from one author who is very famous for exposing of a case of plagiarism in the field of logistics in the last half of the 1990s. As shown in table 2, all these articles can be regarded as standard academic articles in terms of forms because they all have abstracts and keywords at the beginning. If they are just comments from the authors, then it is not necessary to put these styles of writing there. But the styles are not consistent in each of them, e.g., even after the change took place in 2000, some articles used in-text citation while others prefer the style of endnote. And further, none of these articles has bibliographies at the end. Of course, this could represent the feature of the referencing system advocated by the editorial board of the journal. But one can't find any announcement from the editorial board about the style of referencing system being employed in the journal. All the four articles except the one in 1999 dealt with academic plagiarism – but if they are investigated in terms of academic conventions, they are also deviated from academic conventions. So which side is to blame, academic journals or academics who write for them?

As shown in Table 2, the other feature of these four articles is that only the one written in 1999 has an abstract in English. No explanation has been provided about this change by the editorial board. If the logic of layout format change is as expressed by its editor-in-chief to promote effective communication between Chinese academics and their Western counterpart,[18] then to cancel the abstract in English in the journal could be regarded as a retreat in terms of Chinese academics being eager to make their style of writing more compatible to that of the West.

In the article from 2001, 'A Reductive Analysis of A Copy-and-Paste Text and Academic Query', Tan Xuechun, a professor at School of Literature in Fujian Teachers' University in Fujian Province in Southeast China, condemns a young researcher (not identified by name) in China for plagiarising the ideas, definitions and argument from his book (which he collaborated with two other authors). The author had already received a letter of apology sent to him by the plagiarizer, but did not accept the reasons the plagiariser gave, that he was 'not familiar with academic conventions', 'negligent', and ended up engaging only in 'inadvertent plagiarising'. Tan Xuechun criticized the young researcher strongly and expressed his will that the accused respond to the accuser.[19] The sharp contrast between the intolerance of the condemner and the chicanery of the accused in the attitude towards the issue of plagiarism demonstrates that the battle against plagiarism in China is a long-term venture.

Similar to the article from 2001, the author of an article in 2008 ,'Attention Should Be Paid to the Phenomenon of Plagiarism in PhD Theses', Yu Zhaoping,

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[18] Yuan Yuli, 1999, p.90

[19] Tan Xuechun (谭学纯), 'A Reductive Analysis of A Copy-and-Paste Text and Academic Query' (*yige zhantie wenben de huanyuan fenxi ji xueshu zhiyi*一个粘贴文本的还原分析及学术质疑) , *Academics in China*, no. 6, vol.91, 2001, pp.141-147

professor of Chinese in Xiamen University, reported three scholars plagiarizing his works. The difference between this article and the one above is that Yu Zhaoping provided the real names of the persons who plagiarized his work.[20] The choice of this article is to show that eight years after the journal reformed its layout format in 2000, and four years after a national 'academic charter' (rules and norms for carrying out academic practices) was promulgated in 2004, plagiarism within Chinese academe continues to be a problem.

The referencing systems seemed inconsistent for the articles in the same journal. Some academic articles used footnote referencing, others used endnote referencing only. With the latter, for example, in one article published in issue number 6 in 2000, one can't judge whose points of view is in the text only by looking at the reference list at the end of the article because no number equivalence can be found in the text.[21] This situation has not changed much even recently. For example, in an article talking about academic plagiarism and academic criticism in number 5 of 2004, there was no footnote or endnote at all. What is most interesting is that this seemed to be in the standard style of an academic article at the first sight of the first page because there is a title, abstract, and keywords, at the beginning. But not a single footnote or endnote was used to denote the numerous direct quotations running all through the article. Similar things happened in an article published in number 5 of 2008, which is more like that happened to the one in 2000 mentioned above.[22] Thus, plagiarism could be easily convicted in these cases because many authors don't make it clear that they are quoting from someone else.

A limited achievement has been made by the change of journal layout format in dealing with the challenge academic journals faced in the transformation in the new era. In Yuan's words, the purpose of the change was to compete with other academic journals in the market of ideas and knowledge to survive.[23] It could be said to be an achievement in terms of the fame that the journal gained from a provincial to a national level of attributes shortly after the reform of its layout format took place, because many well-known authors with academic prestige nationally and internationally in higher education institutions and research institutes from the political, cultural and economic centres in China - such as Beijing and Shanghai - published their articles in this journal.[24] This achievement

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[20] Yu Zhaoping(俞兆平), 'Attention Should Be Paid to the Phenomenon of Plagiarism in PhD Theses'(boshi lunwen de chaoxi xianxiang yinggai yinqi zhongshi博士论文的抄袭现象应该引起重视) , Academics in China, no.4, vol.131, 2008, pp.88-93

[21] See Wang Yuheng (王玉恒),"Globalization and Value Conflict"(Quanqiuhua yu jiazhi chongtu全球化与价值冲突), Academics in China, no.6, vol.85, pp.250-258.

[22] See Zhao lei (周雷), "The Memo of the Concern for Academe" (xueshu bewang yousi lu 学术备忘忧思录) Academics in China, no.5, vol.108, pp.156-161. Zhou Yongwei (周永卫), "A Philosophical Thinking about the Values of Higher Education" (gaodeng jiaoyu de zhexue sikao 高等教育价值的哲学思考), Academics in China, no.5, vol.132, 2008, pp.135-139

[23] Yuan Yuli, 1999

[24] Guo shiyou(郭世佑), "A Good Periodical Needs Persistence"(*Liangkan zuishi yao jianschi* 良刊最是要坚持), Academics in China, no.6, vol.91, 2001, pp.273-275

is very unusual for a provincial academic journal because even many nationally oriented academic journals can't make such a change, let alone other provincial academic journals. Readers could get more real and authentic information about such issues that they seldom got from other academic journals.

Conclusion

By analysing the features of those articles talking about academic plagiarism and academic criticism, this study shows that the style of writing is not changing much, even though more articles that discuss plagiarism and academic criticism have appeared in the journal after 2000 compared to the number in 1999.

However, the increasing number does not indicate a significant change in the writing style but rather showed that the journal had provided a platform for academics who became concerned with these issues to expose more cases of plagiarism and other academic malpractices. For example, after the change of the layout format of the journal, various referencing systems have been introduced for article writing (such as a traditional Chinese style of writing). Generally speaking, before 2000, academic journal articles' referencing systems mainly featured putting every research item at the end of the article without referring them in the text. The other explanation could be that the dramatic increase of the number of articles in this journal showed that the layout format change encouraged more authors to write about the issues of academic plagiarism and academic criticism, and made their writings more interesting to the readers.

In sum, the layout format change of the journal *Academics in China* was not particulalry fruitful in improving the style of academic writing. Rather, it simply provided a new arena for academics to expose more cases of plagiarism and other academic malpractices. But even while exposing the incidents of academic malpractices, many articles are not consistent in adhering to academic conventions, such as a consistent referencing system. Thus, the road to making a good mix of Chinese styles of writing and Western academic conventions has a long way to go.

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