

Plagiarism as an epistemological obstacle: Mainland Chinese students' development of academic integrity in the transition from Chinese undergraduate to UK Master's programmes.

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Abstract:

The internationalisation of higher education has led to an unprecedented global student migration. As the *major minority* on anglophone campuses around the globe, students from Mainland China provide a case study of high use-value for the study of academic adjustment, particularly academic integrity. Historically, Chinese learners have been singled out for attention in relation to the problematic concept of plagiarism (Bloch, 2012). This study explores the epistemological understanding of academic integrity by Mainland Chinese Master's students in two UK universities using inductive data analysis of five focus groups. Utilizing Baxter-Magolda's epistemological reflection model (1992) for reference, the participants' perceptions of their academic development charted a journey from "absolute knowing" to "independent" and "contextual" approaches to knowledge. From this perspective, a "right and wrong" examination background in China poses a significant epistemological obstacle to the understanding of plagiarism, citation and research. In the transition to research-based essay assessment in the UK (Carroll, 2008), the participants must not only deal with multiple, unfamiliar academic texts in a second language; they must also switch their approach to knowledge. These findings support the holistic approach to academic integrity (Bretag et al., 2013), rather than the predominantly moralistic and proceduralist (Kaposi and Dell, 2013) discourses in higher education.

Introduction

The internationalisation of higher education has led to an unprecedented global student migration. In English higher education, EU and international students make up almost three-quarters of Master's courses ([HEFCE, 2014](#)). There are many advantages to this cross-cultural knowledge exchange, however this diversity raises significant pedagogical issues for academic integrity ([Gallant, 2008](#)). In this context, the concept of plagiarism is pervasive and controversial, especially in reference to accommodating international students to research based forms of assessment ([Carroll, 2008](#)). In English universities, the proportion of Chinese student (23%) almost matches those of local students (26%) on Master's courses. As the *major minority* on anglophone campuses around the globe, students from Mainland China provide a key case study of high use-value for the study of academic adjustment, particularly academic integrity.

Background

The discussion of Chinese learners' understanding of plagiarism in anglophone education is hardly the road less travelled. After the post-Mao reforms, the first rhetorical studies focusing on Chinese learners of English emerged as Chinese universities attempted to catch up with international scientific developments ([Hayhoe, 1996](#)). These studies highlighted a lack of L1 (first language) writing practice in Chinese education ([Mohan & Lo, 1985](#)) and use of imitative learning styles as key factors in English writing development ([Matalene, 1985](#)). In the mid-nineties, the debate moved to the concept of plagiarism in a post-colonial discourse on English language learning ([Pennycook, 1994, 1996](#); [Deckert, 1993, 1994](#)). The turn of the century brought a shift of context for the study of Chinese learners as the first waves of privately funded Chinese students arrived in the UK and other anglophone countries. These numbers have been steadily increasing ever since. For a historic parallel, one would have to look back to the nineteenth century when 10,000 American scholars passed through the doors of German institutions. Brubacher and Rudy deemed this "one of the most extraordinary examples of cultural

interaction in history of higher education” (1997, p. 175), preceding the rise of American universities in the 20th century. If that was extraordinary, how should the current Chinese student migration be described?

The effect on anglophone institutions of this vast influx of Chinese students has been reflected in the literature. Discussions of the concept of plagiarism, of cultural difference and learning deficits have given way to a developmental discourse ([Flowerdew & Li, 2007](#)) aimed at accommodating students from varying educational backgrounds into internationalised institutions ([Carroll & Ryan, 2005](#)). In the UK, authors have looked beyond plagiarism ([Gu & Brooks, 2008](#)) at the success of Chinese students in acclimatising to the different educational expectations, finding what Durkin (2008) terms a “middle-way” between eastern and western approaches to learning. However, despite hard work by scholars and teaching staff, the stereotype of the passive Chinese learner ([Smith & Zhou, 2009](#)) still persists. This is not helped by moralist and proceduralist approaches to plagiarism which often ignore the complex intertextual development that students must undergo in order to succeed ([Kaposi & Dell, 2012](#)). This indicates that the accommodation of Chinese and other international learners is an ongoing process in UK higher education. However in terms of internationalisation, the experiences of Chinese students are also significant from the perspective of Chinese higher education.

In 2003, the Academic World Rankings of Universities (AWRU) were set up by Shanghai Jiaotong University with the support of the Chinese government to assess the global progress of Chinese universities ([ARWU, 2014](#)). The ARWU is seen as the original and most reputable global university rankings ([Altbach, 2013](#)). It has had a tremendous impact on competition in the global higher education sector and helped fuel a “publish or perish” culture in world academia ([Erkkilä, 2013](#)). Citation metrics play a key role in the rankings which reflect the importance of universities in the knowledge based economy. This is significant considering the debates surrounding the concept of

plagiarism and academic integrity issues in relation to Chinese learners, academics and institutions ([Yi, 2011](#)). It indicates a recognition by Chinese policy makers of the importance of citations in knowledge production. In relation to this, recent research in Chinese universities by Guangwei Hu and Jun Lei, and also Yongan Li, highlight a lack of research-based writing practice resulting in a limited understanding of plagiarism and attribution by undergraduate students ([Hu & Lei, 2012](#)), postgraduate researchers ([Li, 2012](#)), and Chinese ESOL lecturers ([Lei & Hu, 2014](#)). These authors suggest studying Anglo-American citation and publication practices can help Chinese students and lecturers in Chinese universities to reflect on the process of knowledge acquisition.

This paper represents the initial focus group study of a wider project exploring the experiences of Mainland Chinese students with academic integrity. The research is not only of significance to the UK institutions attempting to accommodate international students but also the Chinese institutions hoping to rise up the world rankings. The findings indicate that Chinese students studying in UK institutions experience an epistemological shift as a result of research-based writing as the main form of assessment on UK Master's programmes. This is in contrast to the reliance upon "right and wrong" examinations and textbook based learning in Chinese higher education, which may not fit the needs of a knowledge-based economy ([Kvale, 2007](#)). While the academic culture of attribution in anglophone institutions is closely tied up with epistemological beliefs ([Magyar, 2012](#)), the nature of knowledge is often taken for granted, misunderstood and pedagogically neglected ([Howard, 2005](#); [Sandoval, 2005](#)). This research has parallels with studies of native ([Chanock, 2008](#)) and non-native English speakers ([Chandrasoma, Thompson & Pennycook, 2004](#)) adjustment to anglophone higher education. Furthermore, it supports Lei and Hu's ([2014](#)) recent conclusion that, rather than being deeply culturally engrained, perceptions of plagiarism are "pedagogically amenable" (p. 50).

Methodology

This research presents the thematic data analysis of five exploratory focus groups at two UK higher education (HE) institutions carried out in April 2013. The focus groups were composed of up to 6 Mainland Chinese students, who were 6 – 8 months into their one year Master’s programme in the UK. They were from a variety of courses, including education (9), electronic engineering (5), events management (3) and hotel management and tourism (2). The participants were asked to discuss the process of adapting to research practices and the concept of academic integrity in the UK from their educational experience in China. The focus group schedule was structured in a probing manner which would encourage bonding between the homogenous participants and lead to in-depth discussion ([Liamputtong, 2011](#); [Krueger, 2002](#)). The group began with a surface conversation of the challenges faced living in the UK and then delved deeper into the adaptation to academic research and writing skills. Once a rapport was developed amongst the group, the issue of academic integrity either naturally arose or was elicited by the moderator. This included the discussion of citation, paraphrasing and plagiarism, and also the use of *Turnitin*¹, proof-readers and essay writing services.

The focus group schedule produced multiple themes of discussion for in-depth inductive thematic analysis ([Boyatzis, 1998](#)) of the participants’ views. The large quantity of rich data was transcribed for analysis. Transcription is “a key phase of data analysis within interpretative qualitative methodology” ([Bird, 2005, p. 227](#)) and helps to review the focus groups, write memos and develop initial coding. A simple orthographic transcription, with small indicators for laughing or overlapping responses, was necessary to capture the data for thematic analysis. After initial pen and paper coding identified 6 key surface

¹ *Turnitin* is the leading text matching software in UKHE. The software identifies copied text through matching documents, such as student writing and academic articles, to a database of work. The tool has proved successful in identifying non-original text which can assist in the formative development of student writing and the identification of plagiarism (<http://submit.ac.uk/>).

themes, the transcripts were uploaded into the Nvivo² qualitative data analysis software for in-depth analysis. The 6 initial themes were stored and highlighted as nodes in an easily manageable and navigable format ([Bazeley & Richards, 2000](#)). This enabled analysis to move deeper into the data, beneath the words and phrases, to the latent meanings of the participants ([Braun & Clarke, 2006](#)).

Fig. 1: Focus Group Transcription Key

FG	Focus Group	M	Moderator	
P	Participant	MP	Multiple Participants	
FG1	FG2	FG3	FG4	FG5
6 participants	3 participants	6 participants	2 participants	3 participants
15,000 words	11,000 words	16,000 words	12,000 words	17,000 words

Epistemological Understanding Theme

Mainland Chinese students' issues with academic integrity, particularly plagiarism, have been traced to a number of factors. These include writing in an L2, a lack of or difference in the concept of plagiarism in China and the resulting approach to attribution practices ([Bloch, 2012](#)). The initial semantic analysis of the focus groups uncovered these familiar language and culture themes and descriptions of further academic challenges. These included critical thinking, rhetoric, independent learning and approaches to teaching and assessment which have been explored previously ([Gu & Maley, 2008](#)). Taking language out of the equation, the challenges described by the participants were connected by latent analysis to a change in their approach to the nature of knowledge, or epistemology ([Guba](#)

² Nvivo is a popular computer assisted data analysis software ([Bazeley & Richards, 2000](#)).

[& Lincoln, 1994](#)). This epistemological approach is embedded in and has shaped the educational culture and forms of assessment. The *epistemological understanding of research* theme charts the participants' transition from a primarily examination based education system in China to a research essay based assessment at Master's level in the UK.

Epistemology Reflection Model

According to Moon ([2005, p. 10](#)) "higher education is a process during which a student's conception of knowledge is expected to undergo a considerable shift along a continuum that we can broadly describe." There are several models which may be used to chart epistemological development ([Hofer & Pintrich, 1997](#)). The Epistemological Reflection Model (ERM) is the result of Baxter Magolda's longitudinal study of US college students over a period of 16 years ([Baxter Magolda, 1994](#)). This simple model of epistemological development provides a useful framework to assess the focus group data. The ERM is effective in demonstrating the epistemological influence of assessment practice on students, regardless of their nationality. It therefore concentrates on the similarities between students and their academic development, rather than the differences.

Ways of knowing	Description
Absolute Knowing	Knowledge should be acquired. It is quantifiable, inflexible, and unquestionable and comes from higher authorities.
Transitional Knowing	Starting to understand knowledge as a process. Less certain of the absolute authority of facts.
Independent Knowing	Open-minded approach to knowledge as uncertain. People have the right to hold different perspectives.
Contextual Knowing	Context defines knowledge, admits the uncertainty and relativity of information. Uncommon among undergraduates

([Baxter Magolda, 1992](#))

Findings and Discussion:

The latent analysis of the focus group data suggests that the participants were in various stages of a shift from an “absolute knowing” approach in China to at least an “independent knowing” approach in order to succeed in the UK. This transition was represented in the comparison of assessment and educational expectations in China and the UK. This epistemological transition is of particular significance in relation to citation and avoidance of plagiarism. This is discussed below with references to select representative quotes from the focus group transcripts.

Different forms of assessment

The participants present a uniform description of examinations as the main form of assessment performed at high school and undergraduate level in China. These exams presented the common feature of having right and wrong answers, and limited opportunity for extended writing practice:

FG3 P3: *And there's no feedback, just right, wrong, right, wrong. And at last you will got a score of this exam.*

Right and wrong answers serve a purpose in education, however they place knowledge in absolute terms, where knowledge is inflexible and static. Bahtkhin (1981 in Chanock, 2008) refers to this as the dichotomy between monologic and dialogic discourse. Monologic is the authoritative single voice; the right answer. Dialogic is the multiple perspectives interacting to produce truth, in which knowledge is less certain and contextual, as is expected in a research-based essay (Chanock, 2008). The lack of feedback mentioned here is also significant, there is no dialogue with the teacher concerning why the answers are right or wrong. Kvale (2007) levels criticism at

examinations with a lack of feedback, as they may result in a lack of curiosity from students, who turn to pursuing grades, rather than a deeper understanding of the nature of knowledge. This could explain to a certain extent the stereotype of Chinese learners as passive and lacking in academic curiosity (Smith and Zhou, 2009).

Opportunities for writing were provided, however, not prioritised:

FG1 P5: *I think maybe we are just too focused on exams... We, I think the biggest word extent we write, I think is 250 to 300 words, I think the small essay.*

From an epistemological perspective, this approach is also monological. The written tasks are brief, from the perspective of the student, perhaps for the assessment of grammar, spelling and structure. There is little room for discussion of multiple perspectives of knowledge or acknowledgement of sources. Combined with the examinations, this left the students with limited opportunity for individual expression and furthermore, limited interaction with multiple sources. The consensus among participants was that the only experience of extended writing was the undergraduate dissertation:

FG1 P3: *I remember when I was writing my dissertation, undergrad dissertation I just read some article downloaded from somewhere, I just read several... So, it's just several articles and then I can finish my dissertation. I didn't have to read so many papers or books. It's quite different (to the UK).*

Rather than having incrementally built up to this dissertation throughout the undergraduate experience, this was an isolated case of extended writing. This corresponds with the experience of many international students, as noted by Carroll

(2008). The dissertation did not form a significant percentage of the grades and as result not taken seriously by teachers or staff according to the focus groups. The dissertations were not rigorously screened for plagiarism according to the participants, although basic citation and bibliography was required. The limited writing experience, even in their native language, combined with restricted reference to multiple sources reflects a different epistemological approach. Magyar (2012) emphasises that attributing references is not simply mechanical, it relates to expectations about knowledge. The following participant describes the difficulty adapting to the UK:

FG2 P1: *Also, the critical thinking and how to develop the argument, because if you want to develop the argument you need to read many books to get two sides of opinions, the pros and the cons. And then, cite other references to make a conclusion about what opinions you are supporting, you support and it is difficult because in China, for me, I did not do such things in my essay writing.*

From textbooks to multiple perspectives

The participant mentions “pros and cons”, “two sides of the argument”, this shows development from the monologic to a more dialogic approach. In order to take a dialogic approach, students must be exposed to a selection of texts, as indicated by the participant. In China, for the majority of their undergraduate experience, the participants reported using textbooks, or a sole authority:

FG5 P3 *I think the key thing in China is that we have our textbook, textbook, so we don't need to borrow books from the library.*

P2 *Yeah that's a good point.*

FG1 P4 *I think this is the problem, we don't need to read in China.*

P5 *Yes, I cannot remember whether I've read something.*

P4 *The teacher will not give us a reading list, we have a textbook, the reading is in the textbook, so do some preparation work, read chapter 1, then in class we will, the teacher will explain chapter 1, then after you look back to chapter 1. The next class chapter 2. So we don't have extra reading.*

According to Chinn and Malhorta (2002) textbook activities have almost no epistemological authenticity. Textbooks, in combination with strict right and wrong assessments can restrict the nature of knowledge and search for truth from the students' control (Chinn & Malhorta, 2002). More significantly, it also negates the need for referencing, as the knowledge is contained within one authoritative text. Consequently, the participants have little, if any engagement with academic sources, such as peer-reviewed journals. Moving from the monologic, single authority to see the multiple perspectives is a significant step. Not only does it involve acknowledging other authors, through citation, it also involves recognising the role of the individual in research and that "knowledge is socially constructed, and thus includes cooperation, collaboration, and competition" (Sandoval, 2005, p. 639).

Descriptive & critical writing

Overcoming these significant barriers in order to produce work of Master's level involves the rapid transition from one set of educational expectations to another ([Gu, 2009](#)). Especially taking into consideration that UK Master's programmes are only one year long ([Tian & Low, 2011](#)). Further complication arises from working in a second language (Carroll, 2008), however one would expect to see similar epistemological development if they were writing at length from multiple sources in Chinese using equivalent citation

practices. The participants report attempting “critical thinking”, “independent learning” and “using your own words”. Understanding how to achieve these aims is less certain:

FG3 P5 *I think here we need to be more critical, yeah. I have read my assignments today and I have found that the most comment on my assignment is that most of my writing is too descriptive, so I need to be more critical.*

This extract places criticality as the antonym of descriptive, which is significant in terms of academic integrity. Hirvela and Du (2013) have noted that Chinese students represent ideas in writing as “knowledge telling” rather than “knowledge transformation”, which is reflected in their paraphrasing and quotation practices. Describing or telling what an author is saying in the form of paraphrasing, or even directly quoting an author without analysis is an absolute knowing approach. A critical approach would transform the knowledge to suit the context of the essay. This is not simply paraphrasing the words but integrating the idea. It is apparent that the students have not been expected to perform this at their undergraduate level. According to the participants, adapting to this approach to knowledge is a frustrating process they must go through, as is made clear in the following excerpts:

FG1 P1 *I just think why did I write this bullshit, I think it's not that useful and it's also just like copying ideas from the famous scholars, and I was just rephrase a little bit, so I don't want to read my assignment, yeah*

FG5 P2 *Yeah, your paraphrase and the, or they will think, they, she will say, “you use too much reference and where's your own opinion” it's quite confusing about that!*

P3 *Yeah, I feel the same way.*

P2 *It's like don't use your own opinion, you are not a professional. You are not a specialist.*

P1 *They always say the article say, the article have....*

M *Yeah, so you're always just reporting*

P2 *Yes, it's quite confusing about what should I do, should I use the reference or not, either too much or too less.*

P3 *For me it's like (laughs)*

M *Well, that's something*

P3 *What is the point you know? We were asked to do, you know, read the books and make the references and at the same time we're not allowed to give your own opinion. What we do, it's more like a research, right? It's not really a piece of essay where you can build up your own argument.*

These participants are going the opposite extreme of over-citing and losing their ownership of the text in the process (Price, 2002). These sentiments clearly echo those expressed in Chandrasoma, Thompson and Pennycook's (2004) study. Natalie, a third year undergraduate in Australia and native Thai speaker with over 15 years' experience of English, asks:

[w]hy am I wasting my life...just...summarise other people ideas?... The student just think, "I don't care whether the lecturer think I'm intelligent or not, I just want to get quite good mark. I just want to pass this subject; just go and look for a job."

[\(Chandrasoma, Thompson & Pennycook, 2004, p. 177\)](#)

Turnitin, failure & success

The participants described a mix of success and failure in their challenging adjustment to writing assignments in the UK. A familiar theme was the failure of an assignment early on their studies. This is a key stage in highlighting the differences between educational expectations in their own country and the UK. Universities have factored this into their courses, with initial assignments contributing a small percentage of overall grades and a period of academic apprenticeship for students (McGowan, 2005). Failure can be a valuable learning experience, however it can also provide a further source of anxiety and knock the confidence of students if proper support, guidance and explicit criteria are not provided (Carroll, 2008):

FG1 P5 *Yes, but when I referred to the handbooks, it seems that there are quite clear criterias but actually I still think it's very abstract. For example maybe you can get 60 if you have a clear structure, you have a, a proper words, you have clear stand or what. But this is also very obscure to me and actually I failed the assignment, so I just lose confidence in writing assignment.*

As Howard ([1999, p. 157](#)) emphasises, textuality and authorship are concepts which “can never be fully articulated - much less regulated. They can only be enacted”. While explicit policy and criteria are important, they only work in support of the learning process. As Price (2002) illustrates, one cannot learn to ride a bike through reading the manual alone, although it does make the process easier. In the previous example, the focus group was not an appropriate forum to explore further why this participant had failed, although it did not appear to relate to plagiarism. In contrast, the following participant openly reflects on the experience of failure due to plagiarism with particular reference to the *Turnitin* originality detection software:

FG4 M *And have you ever had any problems with Turnitin?*

P2 *Yeah, at the first time, the first assignment, I handed in, the similarity is 41(41%)*

M *Oh, wow.*

P2 *41! Yeah.*

M *Why was that?*

P2 *I failed, for that assignment I failed.*

M *How did you feel when you failed?*

P2 *Wow, yeah, maybe I copied too much, maybe, I don't know, even though I try my best to paraphrase the other document but I don't know.*

M *OK, don't worry, every group I've talked to, one or two people have failed their first assignment for the same reason.*

P2 *But now it's better, my assignment similarity is about 20.*

Such a high percentage of similarity in a first assignment and the admittance that of an attempt to paraphrase indicates this may be a case of patchwriting ([Howard, 1999](#)). This is a good example of how detection software may be used in a formative approach to academic integrity ([Davis, 2007](#)), to show students where they have made an error. From an epistemological development perspective, the quantification of an acceptable amount of similarity is problematic. The 20% line³ is in place usually to take into account for quotations, common expressions and the bibliography in an assignment. In terms of

³ 20% is the baseline score at participating institutions.

authorship and attribution, there is not an acceptable amount of textual plagiarism. As the students in this study have access to submit their assignments to *Turnitin* prior to submission, this raises the issue of whether it assists or impedes epistemological and academic skill development. The participants' report relying on software to identify which text they have copied, which implies poor note taking skills or a lack of authorial awareness. As indicated by McGowan (2005), this approach could be putting the cart before the horse, in that students are concentrating on avoiding plagiarism and reducing the percentage of similarity, rather than having a positive engagement with the culture of enquiry and authorial development.

The key to success

The epistemological journey of the participants in this study has parallels to previous studies ([Chanock, 2008](#); [Chandrasoma, Thompson & Pennycook, 2004](#)). This is encouraging for those working with academic integrity as it implies a similarity in learner development and understanding of unintentional plagiarism beyond broader cultural and linguistic considerations. The educational background, in particular the lack of extended writing practice and focus on "right and wrong", high stakes examinations plays a key role in shaping the students approach to knowledge. This can not only be reflected in the writing process but also the perception of Chinese learners' passivity in class and lack of curiosity (Smith & Zhou, 2009). What is of concern is the gulf which the participants are attempting to bridge when adjusting to study in the UK. In Chandrasoma et al., ([2004](#)) for example, the author describes the jump from 600 word essays to 1500 words as a challenge, an almost 200% rise. In the cases of study, the jump from 300 words to 5000 words in some cases, perhaps with a 2500 word undergraduate dissertation or assignment on a pre-session course, is a phenomenal increase. This is added to by the extra burden of writing in a foreign language and reading multiple unfamiliar specialist texts. The mechanics of plagiarism are one step which teaching staff can help students to use in order to avoid plagiarism but this does not solve the epistemological problem. By

acknowledging these texts, students can see the different perspectives; however this is only the start of the epistemological journey summed up by the following participant:

FG3 P3 *In the essay you don't have to be right, you don't have to be wrong, just like, you can convince the marker, the supervisor, you can say it's right, it's wrong, but you have to prove it by yourself. In your... you have some reason, you have some idea to support your point, that will be ok but in my undergraduate study exams there is only one right answer. You have to answer this question like this then you can get your score and if it is different from this, it's zero, just like this.*

To a writer who is used to interacting with multiple sources, it may seem like a simple task to add a reference to an essay, however this overlooks the deeper thought processes at work. The combination of language anxiety and an inability to make the epistemological shift rapidly may ultimately result in deliberate plagiarism if the student fears failure (Chandsorama et al., 2004). It can also lead to difficulty with research and attribution processes and unintentional plagiarism, such as patchwriting ([Howard & Robillard, 2008](#)).

Conclusion

This focus group study provided an opportunity to explore Mainland Chinese students' shared experiences with academic integrity on UK Master's programmes. While only a small sample was analysed, the results resonated with the existing literature and are due for expansion to further focus groups and documentary analysis as the project progresses. The findings imply that closer attention to the educational backgrounds of the increasingly internationalised student body in the UK may result in improved instruction of attribution practices and epistemological approaches to research. It also raises question

about whether we are asking too much of international students with no background of research-based essays to produce Master's level work in such a short time. For UK institutions, it implies more scope for English for academic purposes (EAP) and academic support on Master's programmes, as suggested by Davis (2013). While support is available for international students, it is not always integrated within the course. Moreover, pressure for dissemination of specialist knowledge takes priority over the transferable academic skills, linguistic and epistemological development which graduates prize the most (Gill, 2010). For Chinese institutions, these students' experiences indicate a clear need for extended research-based writing development at undergraduate level, with less reliance on high stakes, monologic tests. While it is not essential that this writing proscribes exactly to Anglo-American citation practices, it is evident that academic writing is deeply entwined with the role modern universities play in the knowledge based economy, as indicated by the ARWU (2014).

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