

# Culture and Academic Norms

An Exploration of the Import of Cultural Difference on  
Asian Students' Understanding of American  
Approaches to Plagiarism

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## **Introduction**

This short chapter looks at elements of Chinese, and more broadly Asian, history and culture to challenge the idea that academic norms are universally understood and that cheating represents a deliberate attempt to beat the system and reap an advantage. In order to challenge that idea, I will focus on Asian, particularly Chinese, concepts that lie at the base of a different set of norms that govern attitudes toward what we call “academic integrity.” I will start with the power of the written word, turn to the link between written and spoken words, and then point out the implications of deference, age, and authority. I will then explore the idea of collective responsibility and conclude by reviewing the effects of modernization and globalization on classroom behavior, academic integrity, conformity, rebellion, and dissent.

## **The Power of the Written and Spoken Word**

From the earliest Chinese inscriptions on bronze and bamboo, more than 3,000 years ago, words were not merely descriptive; they were the means of discerning the will of a Heaven with the power to forecast the future, determine when to plant and when to reap, and decide whether to sue for peace or go to war. Heaven’s blessings—and the largess of the emperors, generals, great poets, philosophers, and calligraphers—are still visible in carvings on stone stelae, on rocky promontories, and on temples high on mountain sides within Heaven’s reach, on paintings, silk, and bamboo fans. To this day, monks, mediums, and

fortune tellers rely on the written word to communicate with sages of the past, resolve conflicts, predict future events, and cure illnesses. Written characters testify not just to the skills of calligraphers, carvers and painters, and philosophers and poets: they reveal the strength of character that Heaven has conferred upon masters of the written word. This power has not waned. As can be seen in the Korean film *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter ... Spring*, the written word carries weight (Baumgartner, Lee, & Kim, 2003). In the film, a deeply devoted Buddhist monk calms the soul of a murderer and relieves the anxieties of his captors by carving and then painting the words of the Lotus Sutra into the wood floor of his floating shrine.

By the end of the first century CE, the collected writings of the sages of the pre-imperial order formed a canon for the education of scholars and statesmen. That canon laid the foundations for the civil service examination system that held sway over education in China, Korea, and Japan right up until the beginning of the twentieth century. Rote learning lay at the system's base.

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Teaching was didactic and teacher-centered, not student-centered. Teachers and scholars were revered, and students expressed their reverence by regurgitating precisely, word for word, what their mentors, both living and dead, wrote and said. Mastery of the canon, for those who had access to education, started at a very early age with simplified versions of classic tomes that students learned to read and recite or, more accurately, chant in

rhythmic unison. By the sixteenth century, mastery of the written word took the form of the “eight legged essay,” a rigid, formulaic set of rules for classical commentaries embodied in the civil service examinations. This was a system that militated against innovation unless new visions could be couched in the reified language of the classical canon. Innovative ideas were absorbed into the canon.

When the civil service examination system came to end in 1908, it died as an institutional system, but because it was so firmly embedded in the consciousness of both Nationalist and Communist educators and ideologues, it continued to play a central role in the new, “modern” schools and universities. The establishment of Western-style missionary schools in the 1920s, with rare exceptions, did little to alter the didactic approach to teaching and learning by rote. Ideologues of the new “modern” political parties, Nationalist and Communist, held the highest degrees awarded by the civil service exam system, and drew their models of new “revolutionary” education from a potent mix of

neo-Confucian ideas and practices as well as imported Western ideas and institutional structures, including Marxism (later, Leninism) and Russian and Japanese organizational models.

The demise of the imperial system left a vacuum to be filled by competing colonial powers, warlords, and remnants of the Qing Dynasty's secret service, along with new political factions, movements, and parties. By the late 1920s, the Nationalist and Communist parties had absorbed most of these contending groups, and new dogmas emerged to capture the power of both the written and spoken word. "The Three People's Principles," Sun Yat-sen's legacy to the Nationalist (Guomindang) Party, set the pace under Chiang Kai-shek for educational and ideological parroting, first in China and then, after 1947, in Taiwan. Filmmaker Zhang Yimou's romantic tale *The Road Home* (wodi fuqin muqin) gives us a glimpse of the teaching style of the times and the price of failure to toe the Party line in education (Zhao & Zhang, 1999). The writings of the Great Helmsman, Chairman Mao Zedong, and his leading general, Zhu De, were required reading for the cadres of the 8th Route Army. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Mao's "On Contradictions" served to set the tone for the ideological reform of China's millions throughout the 1950s, until Mao's collected works were encapsulated into the "Little Red Book" during the Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976.

Everyone was required to cite Mao word for word, which was not an easy matter since Mao's radio speeches were delivered in a heavily accented Hunanese dialect. In Taiwan, Chiang Kai-shek's speeches were similarly accented in his Zhejiang voice. Footnotes were irrelevant. In post-liberation China, few dared take issue with the constant barrage of incantations from the works of Chairman Mao. They became instruments of class warfare serving to isolate and punish those targeted as "traitors," "landlords," "rightists," "counter-revolutionaries," and later "freaks," "snakes," and "monsters" (niu, gui, she, shen) in the all-embracing cauldron that was the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Some sense of the terror that these political campaigns unleashed can be gleaned in films. Director Tian Zhuang Zhuang's *The Blue Kite* follows the story of a single family in one village as they are subjected to the succession of political campaigns, starting with the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1958 through the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution (Cheng, Luo, & Tian, 1993).

Learning to read between the lines of propaganda, cultivating silence, launching attacks to defray attacks, and mastering the power of the written and spoken word became defensive strategies in those trying times. This was not limited to China and Taiwan. In Korea, following the end of the Korean War, and through the years of military rule and the suppression of student protests, these same lessons applied. The least indication of temerity, rebellion, or

insincerity in self-criticism and class struggle could be disastrous, not just for oneself but for entire families, clans, and communities. Intellectuals were particularly vulnerable. While the trials and tribulations of target groups in China were duplicated in the experiences of the Taiwanese in Taiwan, a substantial number of Taiwanese intellectuals escaped by studying at Japanese and U.S. institutions of higher education. In the relative safety of American and Japanese universities in the 1960s and 70s, this group laid the foundations of the Taiwan independence movement.

### **Defiance, Deviance, and the Decline of the Power of the Written and Spoken Word and Retreat from the Collective**

The succession of campaigns and their devastating impact meant that many intellectuals learned not only to read between the lines of documents, orders, notices, and speeches, but also to cheat the system that so oppressed them. They used a variety of means to do so, some excruciatingly difficult. Forging confessions and self-criticisms, feigning cooperation with their oppressors, and in not a few cases, turning friends and family over to Public Security were among those strategies (Greenblatt, 1977). Silence in the face of disaster, in order to protect parents, spouses, and children, fractured many families, and it is only in the last two decades that the silence has been broken. In the last stages of the Cultural Revolution, young Red Guard college students broke into the Public Security files to discover their own political dossiers collected over their school years. They destroyed the files, but not before publishing them in Red Guard newspapers. In those files lay the evidence of the corrupt use of the power of the written and spoken word in the manufacture and dissemination of propaganda. The campaign against the “Four Olds” that marked the beginning of the Cultural Revolution struck a blow against norms of deference to age and authority, and the rebellion seeped into the social and cultural fabric in China, as it did in the rise of the Taiwan independence movement. In the case of Taiwan, student rebellion first simmered and then boiled over among Taiwanese students studying in the United States, free as they were from at least some of the sources of oppression.

I saw the signs of that rebellion in 1983 when I contracted with a Hong Kong agency to recruit American doctors to attend medical conferences in Tianjin at the No.1 Tianjin Hospital. At one point, as senior physicians and hospital administrators droned on from the podium, I overheard a group of young medical students sitting behind me. Their acid comments interrupted the conference proceedings: “old Party hack, we’ve listened to you for years, and you still have nothing to say” was one of the less acerbic comments made by the chorus of voices around me. This was not the first round in the torrent of

rebellion against authority. Students and faculty denounced the new “eight legged essays,” the pedagogy of rote learning, and the college entrance examination system in the “100 Flowers” campaign of 1957-1958. They were rudely suppressed and subjected to “reform” at the time. The chorus of dissent laid the foundations for the protest at Tiananmen in 1989 (Spence, 2003). In Taiwan, the democracy movement laid the groundwork for the Kaohsiung Incident of 1979, when young dissidents celebrated the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and were charged with sedition. While the dissent among students was met with force, reform of the educational system and relaxation of ideological constraints followed the Tiananmen massacre in China and the death of Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan.

Normalization of relations between China and the United States paved the way for Chinese students to enter U.S. colleges and universities. Until the early 1980s, students from Taiwan were the largest segment of the Asian student population on American campuses. Networks of English-language training institutions helped to improve performance on TOEFL tests in Korea, China, and Taiwan. By the late 1990s, the first sizeable contingents of graduates returned to their home countries to fill teaching posts in the most eminent of their nation’s educational institutions. They were the first generation of new educators steeped in American-style, student-centered pedagogy. In the years since the late 1990s, their numbers have grown. Their influence is, however, limited because they are young, their numbers are still relatively small, and the regimes they serve have not, as of this date, made peace with the past. In the meantime, as rapid economic growth increases disposable incomes in Asia, more and more students of ever-increasing diversity have access to higher education at home and abroad. We have more women and minorities among our international students than ever before.

Many of those students, but certainly not all, are poorly prepared for entry into the U.S. system, either in terms of English language preparation or in terms of adjustment to U.S. educational norms. This is particularly pertinent with respect to students coming from regions beyond the major cities and well-funded institutions of China’s east coast, beyond the most prominent universities in Korea, and in Taiwan. Students from the hinterlands are more likely to come from educational institutions that are teacher-centered, not learner-centered. They are more likely to trace descent from families that observe traditional and collective norms and to come from minority backgrounds (the Hui, Miao, Manchu, Uighur, and Tibetans in China; aboriginals and rural Taiwanese in Taiwan; North Koreans and Chinese in Korea). That scenario changes as modernization and globalization extend further into less developed and less advantaged regions of any given country. At the same time, these are the students who will ultimately displace an older generation of faculty. They are

driven to succeed by parents whose sole hope, after so many disappointments, rests on the shoulders of their children—or, where the one-child policy holds sway, their one and only child. That pressure to succeed helps to account for China’s and South Korea’s rapid economic growth. But growing up in a pressure cooker is not particularly conducive to norms of academic integrity or individual health and wellness. Children who lose “face,” another traditional concept that has survived modernization and globalization, do so not just for themselves, but for their families, their communities, and their home countries (Greenblatt, 1979). With so high a price for failure, silence, self-starvation, isolation, and cheating are all among the unhappy options from which students sometimes choose at the risk of being labeled devious and unwelcome “aliens.”

Given the rapid pace of modernization and change, it is no longer a simple ecological formula that determines where traditionalist and modern values are

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situated. Children growing up in a traditional family and attending traditional schools may live right around the corner from modern families with children who attend modern schools. The fact that “modern” pedagogy and English language training is now in the offing throughout Asia does nothing to ensure that students learn about American academic norms and expectations. Nor do course syllabi

with instructions on academic integrity assure compliance. We know that well enough from the behavior of American students.

#### **Case Studies in Normative Maladaptation and Misinterpretation**

I have tried to make the case that written and spoken words are filtered through language, culture, and experience. International students no longer express surprise when they see the sign outside the door of our office that says “No Standing,” but there was a time, not so long ago, when the words on the sign denoted American obsession with legal norms. What other society prohibits individuals from standing on the sidewalk? Two more examples will suffice to make this point about cultural and linguistic filters.

One Saturday morning, a Chinese student was busy setting up the fax machine for a message to his parents. The instructions were pasted on the wall above the fax machine. While he was focusing on this task, the dean walked in, turned to the student and said, “You can’t do that!” The student, looking

directly at the instructions on the wall, replied “Yes, I can.” After a moment’s pause the dean said, “You’ll pay for that!” to which the student replied, “Yes, I will,” and the dean left the room. By the end of the following week, the student received a letter from the dean accusing him of having violated university rules that prohibited student use of the departmental fax machine. The dean also accused the student of being “hostile.” In his replies to the dean the student had, of course, been referring to his ability to understand the instructions on the use of the fax. He had always paid the departmental secretary for phone calls home from the departmental office, and he had intended to do the same on this occasion. As for being “hostile,” the student was concentrating intently on his task (brows furrowed, eyes focused straight ahead, jaw clenched). Having been an interpreter for delegations from China over a long period of time, I am aware of American hosts’ misreading of Chinese faces. “Skip,” they would say, “I don’t think they like what I am saying,” interpreting intense concentration as a sign of distaste or disagreement.

This is not mere happenstance. Homeland Security’s profile of the facial expression of “angry” men, used for training airport security personnel to spot potential terrorists, commits the same error confounding concentration and hostility. A student’s silence when classroom discussions and opinions are called for is often confounded with inability to think out loud, absorb concepts, or take the initiative, when deference to faculty is, in fact, the reason for failure to “speak up” in class and express his or her own opinions. A group of students in an engineering class, all of whom were Asian, were charged with violating academic integrity. The instructions on the syllabus made it clear, so the professor thought, that the work submitted for grades had to be one’s own. These students shared notes and discussed their lab procedures and findings with one another. Appalled by the charges filed against them, they launched a counterattack on the Internet until their professor discovered the online rebellion and joined the fray. Chaos ensued. Most of the students were eventually given the opportunity to repeat the course. The incident’s lasting feature, however, was an unresolved conflict pitting collectivist and collaborative notions of moral and ethical responsibility against individualist, competitive norms and values.

### **Mediating Cultural Differences: Five Suggestions Toward a Sustainable Approach to Academic Integrity**

1. If “know thyself” was once central to classical Western pedagogy, knowing the other and oneself through the other is the sine qua non of the extraordinarily dangerous world we now inhabit. There is no substitute for shared, thoughtful inquiry into the backgrounds of both domestic and international students,

assuming that “sharing” is spontaneous, voluntary, and reciprocal. Of course, this approach assumes that all parties to the interaction that ensues are sufficiently articulate to be heard, and that partners to the interaction are capable of listening. Listening gets minimal attention in the discourse about language skills. We, who often demand that foreigners speak English “just as we do,” have the skills to understand sentences spoken by foreigners with erroneous tense, inappropriate prepositions, missing articles, and what we perceive as awkward phrasing. The rewards of good listening are often the first tentative steps toward real and lasting relationships that make learning of any kind, including the learning of academic norms, much easier.

2. Orientation programs that prepare students for entry into the U.S. academic normative order are all too frequently classes in the rules of proper citation presented in true didactic style and accompanied by handouts that supplement the volumes of documentary material that accompany every other facet of an orientation program. They are lost in the pile of accumulated paper. Academic integrity is too important a topic to rest on didactic grounds. It should be separated from general orientation, so that time is allocated to a survey of student experiences, and their understandings of plagiarism, competition, and collaboration, in order to arrive at a consensus to which the students themselves have contributed.

3. Calling upon on the aid and support of international student associations on campus is a must. At Syracuse University, the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA), the Korean Students Association (KSA), and the Taiwan Students Association (TSA) have all run their own orientation sessions and provided housing to incoming students. They all organize cultural events, and in the case of CSSA run seminars on U.S.-China diplomatic, trade, and cultural relations. All three have, at one time or another, produced handbooks and run workshops for their constituents. As sources of support for adaptation to U.S. academic culture, these groups and others like them are indispensable. At the very least, they should be honored for the roles they play and acknowledged as cultural mediators. That happens all too rarely.

4. Imparting norms of academic integrity cannot be left to written instructions on syllabi. Bereft of context, discussion, and validation, these norms are little more than street signs that say “No Standing.” Faculty, staff, and students need to understand that being in America, doing it the way we do, subject to our norms, is rarely reversible (Tucker, 2003; Shei, 2005). Few Americans would be able to make sense out of similar “instructions” in Chinese or Korean, much less be able to read between the lines of the text to find out how those instructions are actually carried out in the face of the cultural filters through which they take on meaning (Saltmarsh, 2005).<sup>1</sup> That enterprise requires acknowledgement of the diverse experiences our international students

bring to the tasks they are asked to perform, so that consensus reigns and adaptation to a different normative order is assured (Greenblatt, 2005). Lopsided, one-way expectations do little to sustain academic integrity.

5. Offices of International Services can and should play an important role in the creation of the kind of consensus I am recommending here. Such centers are staffed with professionals who have the experience and the linguistic and listening skills to “hear” cultural and linguistic differences, including accented or ungrammatical English. And in many cases they have the background and experience to assess the role of the sociocultural filters used in adapting to American educational norms—or, if they don’t, they know where to find the necessary expertise among students, staff, faculty, and members of the on- and off-campus communities (Smithee, Greenblatt, & Eland 2004).

### Notes

1. Saltmarsh takes a broader and very critical stance, and applies a deconstructionist analytical framework linking profit-making capitalist educational institutions and patent racism when international students, particularly Asian students, are identified as the perpetrators of plagiarism. I do not share that view. In my view, ignorance of international diversity plays a greater role than racism in the charge of plagiarism against Asian students.

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