

My statement sent 19 December 2007:

To my students in Beijing, Fall 2007:

While grading papers today I encountered two more cases of plagiarism. One was sophisticated but serious. The other was so blatant that it was almost unbelievable. That makes a total of three students who have failed my courses because of plagiarism.

If I had not warned you and given you the opportunity honestly to correct your essays, there would have been several more. I thank those of you who were honest and showed me what you had copied.

Plagiarism disturbs me greatly, both because it corrodes my relationship with you as my students, and because it tells me things about China and Beida that neither you nor I want to hear.

It corrodes my relationship with you because I work hard to be a good teacher, I take time to prepare good lectures, and I spend many hours providing detailed feedback on essays. It is hard work. You cannot imagine what it is like to correct the details of the 500th essay until you have done it yourself. I do that to help you learn to think more clearly, to express yourself convincingly, and to develop your intellectual power, your ability to understand the world. I also do it because I value you, I value your ideas, and I think the world will be a better place when you can all think clearly and behave intelligently. Later in life, some of you will be leaders with important positions. I want you to be competent and honest, for I have seen too often what terrible can things can happen when leaders are incompetent and dishonest. Leadership aside, I want all of you to be able to create value in your lives, whatever you end up doing, and you cannot do that if you deceive.

When a student whom I am teaching steals words and ideas from an author without acknowledgment, I feel cheated, dragged down into the mud. I ask myself, why should I teach people who knowingly deceive me? Life is too short for such things. There are better things to do.

Disturbingly, plagiarism fits into a larger pattern of behavior in China. China ignores international intellectual property rights. Beida sees nothing wrong in copying my textbook, for example, in complete violation of international copyright agreements, causing me to lose income, stealing from me quite directly. No one in China seems to care. I can buy DVDs in stores and on the street for about one US dollar. They cost \$20-30 outside China; the artists who produced them are losing enormous amounts of stolen income, billions of dollars each year. China has become notorious for producing defective products that have to be recalled because they pose health threats to consumers. A recent cartoon in an American newspaper shows the Central Committee reacting to an accusation that they have violated human rights. The response? "Wait until they see what we put in their toothpaste next!" Corruption is a serious problem in a booming economy. For example, in the mining industry, about 5000 miners die each year and mine owners cut corners in violation of the law. The social

fabric breaks when workers die because owners are greedy. The Mandate of Heaven is lost.

China appears to have lost her way. Confucius said, do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you. He also said, a gentleman is honest. Honesty and reciprocity are the basis of trust and community. We cannot get along in a world filled with deceit and defection; such a world becomes a Hobbesian war of all against all, nasty and brutal. We cannot do science if we cannot trust what others publish. There is no reason to try to replicate a result if it cannot be trusted. It would not be worth the effort. Without replication there can be no shared knowledge that is tested and trustworthy - that is, no science. Without science, there can be no technology. And without technology, there can be no steady increase in productivity, economic growth, and a better life for all.

The penalties for plagiarism that you will encounter later in life are very serious. If you do it as a graduate student, you can be expelled from university, and you will not get your degree. If you do it as a faculty member, you can lose your job. I know you may not believe that, for the sociology professor at Beida who translated an entire book into Chinese and published it with his name on it only lost his administrative positions but kept his professorship and salary. But things are not like that elsewhere. When plagiarism is detected in the United States, it can end the career of the person who did it. That is also true in Europe.

The fact that I have encountered this much plagiarism at Beida tells me something about the behavior of other professors and administrators here. They must tolerate a lot of it, and when they detect it, they cover it up without serious punishment, probably because they do not want to lose face. If they did punish it, it would not be this frequent.

I have greatly enjoyed teaching some of you. I have encountered young minds here that are as good as any in the world. Many of you are brave, most of you work very hard, most of you are honest, and some of you are brilliant. But I am leaving with very mixed feelings. It is quite sad that so many promising young Chinese think it is necessary to cheat to succeed. They damage themselves even more than the people from whom they steal and the people whom they deceive with stolen words.

Sincerely, Steve Stearns

From the Dean of the College of Life Sciences at PKU:

Steve,

Thank you for bringing this up to all of us.

We will regain our long held tradition of honesty and trust. Since you know Chinese history well, you would know that China is recovering from a century of difficulties, including loss of values that are common to all humans.

I should also add that all faculty members hired to my school after I have taken

on the position at the School of Life Sciences will lose jobs if they violate basic rules of integrity. It will be a small step, but I hope that it will be the beginning of more changes that many of us are working on.

I also hope that you have not given up hope for our students and our university. We do encounter many problems, but it is the hope for an increasingly better future that keep us working to improve the university, to make it great in one day when it contributes more to the world than it takes from the world.

Thank you for your work and your voice.

Yi

My response to Yi Rao:

Yi,

I certainly have not given up hope. I have had wonderful students here. I gave several of them strong recommendations to graduate school with complete confidence in their honesty, their intelligence, and their determination to work hard and succeed.

And I have had wonderful experiences in China, as well as others.

Despite that, as you know, the problem is real.

Your statement is clear and brave. You deserve our support.
Let me know if I can help.

Best wishes,
Steve