Plagiarism and international students: A matter of values differences?

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Abstract

Plagiarism is often cited by lecturing staff as one issue causing difficulties for international students in tertiary education. However, there is little hard evidence of different perceptions of what this involves or of the possible sources of these differences.

A survey was carried out of 31 Chinese students preparing to enter university and 63 New Zealand students in their first year of university study. All participants completed an instrument on which they rated their perception of the seriousness of six scenarios involving different levels of plagiarism on a nine point Likert scale.

Significant differences were found on four of the six items with Chinese students rating these items as less problematic than New Zealand students.

These finding are discussed in relation to the findings of survey of values completed by the 31 Chinese students.

Implications of the findings for international students and tertiary institutions and suggestions for further research are discussed.

Key Words

Plagiarism, values, Chinese students, New Zealand students

Introduction

In 2003 the number of students from China in New Zealand and Australia peaked at over 50,000 in each country {Education New Zealand, 2005}. Whilst numbers have dropped more recently they are still the dominant source country in New Zealand universities. On top of the international student numbers are a growing number of recent migrants. These students are presenting some unique challenges to teachers and academics. One of these challenges centres around teaching these students not to plagiarise.

Plagiarism is not unique to Chinese students – it is considered a problem on most Western campuses. An Australian study suggests "more that 8 per cent of students have been found to pilfer large amounts of text from the web" (Buckell, 2003). Walker's summary of plagiarism rates suggests a higher rate of between forty and sixty percent amongst students in the US and UK (Walker, 1998). A more recent New Zealand study, with a very broad definition of cheating, reported an overall figure of 80% of students admitting to engaging in any one of the listed offences (de Lambert, Ellen & Taylor, 2002). Amongst the offences admitted to were; paraphrasing from a web site, book or periodical without referencing (42.1%), copying from a web site, book or periodical without referencing (25.8%), one student allowing another student to copy their assignment (34.7%), padding out a bibliography with references that were not actually used (38.4%), copying information directly from a web site, book or periodical with reference to the source but without quotation marks (36.8%), writing an assignment for someone else (8.9%), and paying another person to complete an assignment (3.9%).

Rumours abound of rampant plagiarism amongst international students. What does not abound is empirical evidence that shows that the rate of plagiarism is higher amongst international students, especially those from parts of Asia, than amongst domestic students. It is simply not enough to say that they appear more often in front of discipline committees. If this is the case it may due to a variety of reasons. In a New Zealand study de Lambert et al. (2002) did not see any evidence for the overall level of cheating being greater or

smaller amongst Asian students when compared with New Zealand students, although there were differences in the frequency of types of cheating. Of interest were that the frequencies of copying published information without referencing and paraphrasing without referencing were marginally lower for Asian than for New Zealand students. However, as this study relied on self reporting it may not reflect the true situation but simply different attitudes towards referencing.

Comparative studies of attitudes towards plagiarism are few. With a very small sample in the UK Banwell (2003) found that Chinese students felt uneasy about rewriting important authors' statements in their own words and that it is generally safer, for students for whom English is a second language, and better to present ideas in the words of the texts. In a more extensive study, though limited to postgraduate students, Introna et al (2005) discovered distinct cultural attitudes between Chinese and UK students (the study also included Greek and other Asian students). Only 60% of Chinese students compared with 88% of UK students judged writing or providing a paper for another student as "somewhat or very serious." 40% of Chinese students compared with 81% UK students saw as somewhat or very serious plagiarizing a paper in any way using the internet as a source. On other matters there was substantial similarities with 70% of Chinese and 75% of UK students seeing as somewhat or very serious, copying material, almost word for word, from any source and turning it in as your own work. These percentages dropped to 40% and 38% respectively when it was only copying a few sentences of material without referencing them.

A number of reasons have been given for acts of plagiarism including that it is, simply cheating to get ahead, the only way to cope with pressure of expectation, lack of ability, peer pressure and cultural difference. It is the last of these reasons that is being investigated in this paper. It has been postulated that students from non-Western backgrounds have a different understanding of self, communication, ownership of words and, hence, concepts of authorship than those from Western backgrounds (Scollon 1995, Howard 1999, Pickering 2002, Leask 2004). For example, Scollon (1995) notes that for Cantonese "[because] the self is defined quite independently of communication; the focus is not on originality of expression, but rather on ratification of pre-existing self and social placements." Given different concepts of ownership of words and authorship it would be expected that there would be differences in moral judgment, or attitude, towards acts of plagiarism between different groups.

The hypothesis being tested in this paper is whether Chinese students really do have a different attitude towards acts of plagiarism than do New Zealand students? This is another step along the path towards understanding why these students may approach texts in a particular way. It is important that it is not considered entirely in isolation from learning styles which will also be influenced by cultural background. For example, Howard (1999) challenges the popular notion that "patchworking" whereby students take a text and make only minor changes to it, is a form of plagiarism. Rather, Howard argues this is imitation and a normal part of the learning process that we all participate in. For students of English as a second language it is normal to imitate whole phrases. Place this on top of the assertion that respect is shown an authority by not changing their words then one begins to see the complex interconnection of strands that influence writing and citing behaviour.

Irrespective of the students' attitudes towards plagiarism, Western academics are still faced with the need to teach Chinese students not to plagiarise according to an academic understanding of plagiarism. Knowing something of the students' own academic backgrounds and methods of learning is obviously of assistance in this. In this paper we investigate some of the values of Chinese students on the basis of the assumption that one's values are core to determining one's behaviour, especially if they are being told that a particular action is morally good or bad, as is often the case in teaching about plagiarism.

Methodology

Two groups of students participated in the research, the first a class of international students from China studying English prior to entry to tertiary education and the second students in a first year class in Education at a New Zealand University.

Demographic data pertaining to age, sex, length of time in New Zealand, and the level of school attended immediately prior to entering the language school were also collected. The Chinese group consisted of 31 students, 23 Male, 8 Female, with a mean age of 21.5±2.5 years. Only one had been in New Zealand less than 3 months, 8 from 3 to 5 months, 12 from 6 to 12 months, and 10 more than 12 months. Immediately

prior to attending the language course, 10 had been studying English elsewhere in New Zealand, 8 had been at a University in China, and 5 at a secondary school in China and 1 each at secondary school in New Zealand and a language school in China, the rest were not studying.

The New Zealand students had a mean age of 19.3±1.6 years and were all first year Education students taking a course in child development. There were 7 Males and 56 females. The possibility of bias caused by the weighting between the sexes is discussed below.

One questionnaire was produced for both groups and a second questionnaire was produced for the Chinese student group. The first questionnaire comprised six scenarios depicting different types of plagiarism were presented to two groups of students. The scenarios are set out in Table 1. For each scenario the student was asked to make a value judgement about the behaviour of a student in the scenario on a nine point Likert scale from extremely good to extremely bad.

For the Chinese group the scenarios were translated into simplified Chinese. The accuracy of the translation was assessed independently through translation back into English.

The Chinese group were also presented with a Chinese Values Survey (CVS), also in simplified Chinese. The CVS was developed by a group of researchers headed by Michael Bond called the "The Chinese Cultural Connection"(Chinese Cultural Connection 1987). It was deliberately developed with Chinese social scientists to avoid a Western bias. Forty basic values for Chinese people are represented by at most a small number of characters. The survey asks participants to indicate on a nine point scale for each value the importance they as individuals hold to the value. The scale runs from, 1, "Of no importance at all" to, 9,"Of supreme importance." The original survey has been published in Traditional Chinese and in English. For the students from China this necessitated preparing the survey in Simplified Chinese.

Table 1

Scenario	
1	A student in his first year at a university in New Zealand is asked to write an essay on how banks work. He finds a very good summary in a book recommended by his teacher. He copies this summary into his essay. He does not say in the essay where he got the summary from.
2	A student in her first year at a university in New Zealand is asked to write an essay on how banks work. She uses the material provided by her teacher. In her essay she does not say where she got this material from.
3	A student in his first year at a university in New Zealand is asked to write an essay on how banks work. He finds a very good essay on the web. He cuts and pastes this essay and submits it as his own.
4	A student in her first year at a university in New Zealand is asked to write an essay on how banks work. She finds a very good article on the web. She cuts and pastes part of this article and puts it in her essay. She says at the bottom of her essay which web site she got the information from.
5	A student in her first year at a university in New Zealand is asked to write an essay on how banks work. She finds a book in the library that has a chapter on that subject. She rewrites that chapter in her own words and submits it as her essay. She does not say which book she used.
6	A student in his first year at a university in New Zealand is asked to write an essay on how banks work. He is a good student but is suffering from an illness. A friend writes the essay for him. He then submits it as his own.

Results

A comparison of plagiarists

Figure one compares the mean response of the Chinese and the New Zealand students on the nine point Likert scale for each scenario. In four of the six scenarios the Chinese students considered the action significantly less bad (or more good) than the New Zealand students.
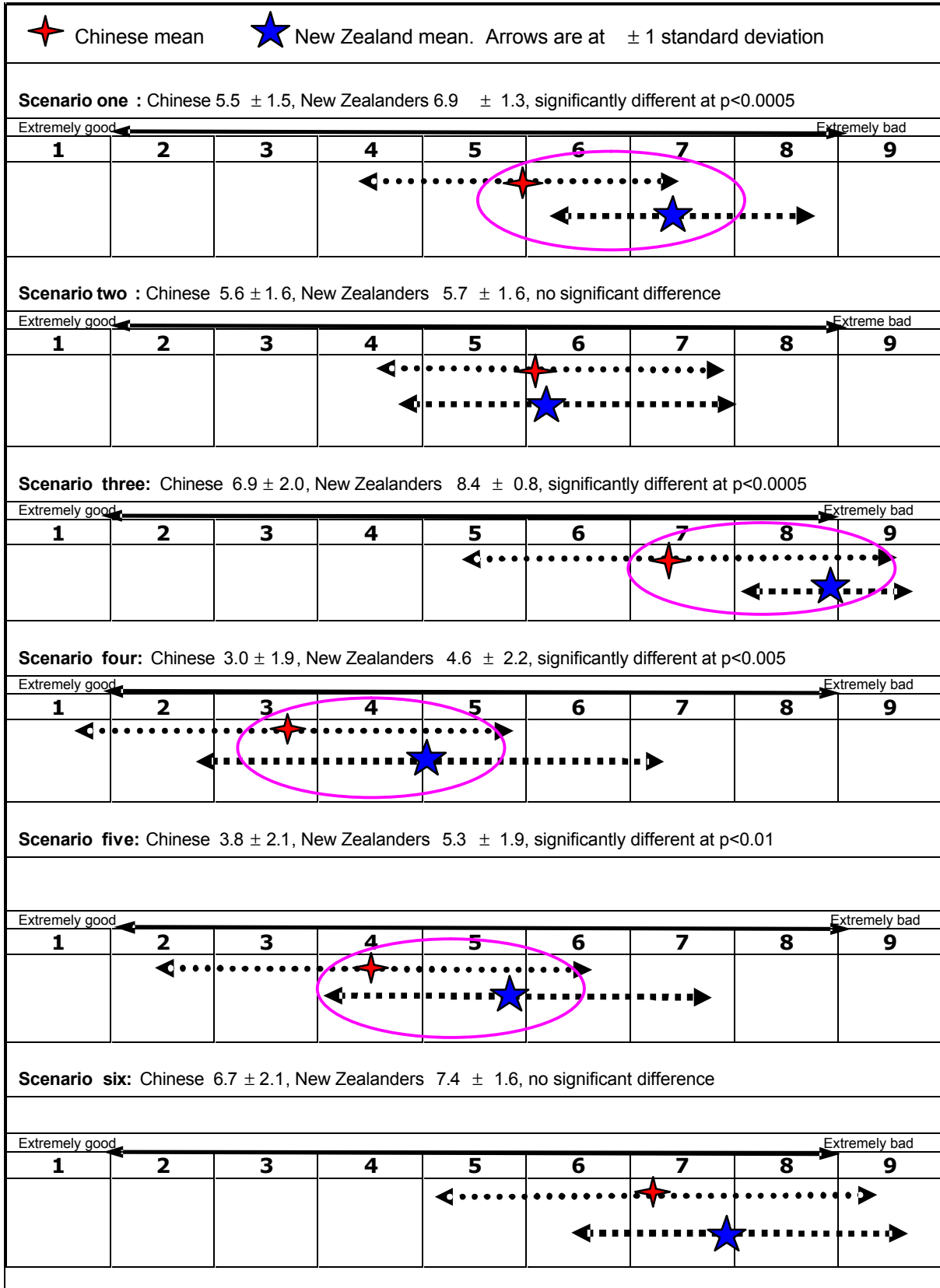
Figure 1: Comparative responses to plagiarism scenarios

Because the New Zealand sample was dominated by females and the Chinese by males there was a concern that there may be a gender influence on the results. Internally, amongst the New Zealanders, only scenario six showed any significant difference between the sexes. The males considered the action slightly more bad (8.3) compared to the females (7.3) with $p<0.05$. Between the Chinese males and Chinese females there was no significant difference.

Perhaps more revealing than the means of the responses are the percentages who placed the action on the "good" side of the scale (1-4) compared to the "bad" side of the scale (6-9), see Table 2. In every scenario the New Zealand students saw the action as more "bad" than the Chinese students.

Table 2

Scenario	New Zealanders		Chinese	
	Bad	**Good**	**Bad**	**Good**
1	90%	6%	42%	23%
2	56%	19%	42%	16%
3	100%	0%	74%	13%
4	42%	48%	13%	71%
5	47%	40%	19%	58%
6	85%	5%	65%	16%

From the Western academic paradigm it is quite shocking how many students saw the action of the student in the scenarios as good. Amongst the New Zealand students there were significant numbers who saw submitting work without acknowledging the source of the ideas or the very words used as good (scenario 1,2,5), an action universally frowned upon by western academics. These numbers were higher for the Chinese who had not been exposed at a New Zealand tertiary institution to the Western paradigm.

Another difference between New Zealand and Chinese is that the Chinese were three times more likely to engage the help of a friend in a crisis to write and essay for them. Another interesting difference is that no New Zealand student thought it good – or even neutral – to cut and paste an essay from the web, whereas 13% of Chinese thought it good, and a quarter in total did not think the action bad. This is significant in that it is unlikely that those responding this way are doing so because they are somehow "dishonest" or "cheats" as the Western paradigm would label someone who acted as the student did in this scenario. More likely, it was because they saw some merit in the student's action – possibly because they saw that the student had done some research, made a judgment as to what is good in terms of the content of the web site, recognised that someone else expressed something better than they did, and gave difference to someone else's authority (it would be arrogant to think they could do better). The fact that they did not think it necessary to acknowledge authorship may simply reflect the lack of a concept of private ownership of words – that is they believe that all that is in books or on the web is public domain.

Scenario 4 and 5 show the greatest variance in responses. The variance in Scenario 4 may be a reflection of some ambiguity in the situation described. However, Scenarios 5 seems to show a large ignorance as to the Western convention of referencing the sources from which ideas were taken.

Chinese Values
Table 3 gives the "importance rating" for each of the 40 values that the Chinese students evaluated. The values are presented from the most important, *Trustworthiness*, to the least important, *Being Conservative*. There was a little variation between sexes, namely that males rated *Tolerance of others*, *Harmony with others*, and *Personal steadiness and stability* all marginally more important than did females ($p<0.05$), whilst males rated *Protecting your face* ($p<0.05$) and *Chastity in women* ($p<0.01$) less important than did females.

Table 3

Chinese Value	Importance rating		RANK
	Mean	SD	
Trustworthiness	8.42	0.99	1
Filial piety (obedience to parents, respect for parents, honouring of ancestors, financial support of parents).	8.29	1.27	2
Self-cultivation	8.00	1.18	3
Courtesy	7.90	1.25	4
Patriotism	7.81	1.70	5
Solidarity with others	7.68	1.59	6
Persistence (Perseverance)	7.58	1.77	7
Having a sense of shame	7.58	1.63	8
A close, intimate, friend	7.57	1.81	9
Kindness (Forgiveness, compassion)	7.45	1.52	10
Wealth	7.45	1.82	11
Knowledge (Education)	7.43	1.17	12
Sincerity	7.42	1.46	13
Tolerance of others.	7.39	1.41	14
Sense of righteousness	7.29	1.74	15
Observations of rites and social rituals	7.26	1.97	16
Industry (Working hard).	7.23	1.82	17
Harmony with others	7.23	1.38	18
Adaptability	7.16	1.73	19
Prudence (Carefulness)	7.16	1.90	20
Reciprocation of greetings, favours, and gifts	7.10	1.94	21
Patience	7.03	2.11	22
Humbleness.	6.97	1.74	23
Personal steadiness and stability	6.97	1.58	24
Benevolent authority	6.79	1.74	25
Resistance to corruption	6.74	1.86	26
Loyalty to superiors.	6.61	1.71	27
Ordering relationships by status and observing this order	6.48	2.28	28
Contentedness with one's position in life	6.29	1.97	29
Moderation, following the middle way	6.23	1.86	30
Respect for tradition	5.90	2.17	31
Thrift	5.74	1.91	32
Repayment of both the good or the evil that another person has caused you	5.71	1.79	33
Chastity in women	5.47	2.47	34
Non-competitiveness.	5.45	2.11	35
A sense of cultural superiority	5.23	2.18	36
Having few desires	4.20	1.99	37
Keeping oneself disinterested and pure	4.10	2.43	38
Protecting your "face"	3.90	1.88	39
Being conservative	3.67	2.06	40

The original CVS did not involve participants from the People's Republic of China, rather Chinese ethnicity and was done in 1987 well before the diaspora of Chinese students. In the early 1990s Garrott conducted the CVS amongst a cohort of 512 Chinese college students of English at various colleges in China. This is the nearest group to which we can make a comparison. Whilst nine of the top ten ranked values of our results also appeared in the top ten of Garrott there were nevertheless a number of significant differences between the mean scores as indicated in Table 4

Table 4

Value	This study mean	*This study rank*	Garrott mean	*Garrott rank*	Significance level
Values rated significantly higher in this study					
Filial piety (obedience to parents, respect for parents, honouring of ancestors, financial support of parents).	8.29	*2*	7.54	*12*	0.01
Wealth	7.45	*11*	6.39	*23*	0.01
Tolerance of others.	7.39	*14*	5.89	*25*	0.01
Harmony with others	7.23	*18*	6.04	*24*	0.01
Prudence (Carefulness)	7.16	*20*	5.87	*26*	0.01
Benevolent authority	6.79	*25*	4.43	*35*	0.01
Loyalty to superiors.	6.61	*27*	4.49	*32*	0.01
Ordering relationships by status and observing this order	6.48	*28*	4.15	*36*	0.01
Contentedness with one's position in life	6.29	*29*	4.6	*31*	0.01
Moderation, following the middle way	6.23	*30*	3.29	*39*	0.01
Respect for tradition	5.90	*31*	4.46	*33*	0.01
Non-competitiveness.	5.45	*35*	3.51	*38*	0.01
Being conservative	3.67	*40*	2.58	*40*	0.01
Values rated significantly lower in this study					
Knowledge (Education)	7.43	*12*	8.37	*1*	0.01
Chastity in women*	5.47	*34*	7.41	*14*	0.01
Protecting your "face"	3.90	*39*	4.85	*30*	0.05
*This study's results skewed by a significant difference between Male and Female respondents					

Discussion

Plagiarism paradigms
The data identified a clear distinction between the Chinese students' and the New Zealand students' moral judgment of acts of plagiarism. In general, the Chinese students saw the action of the student in the scenarios as less "bad" on average than did the New Zealand students. Quite revealing was that many students saw some of the actions described in the scenarios as good.

What the current study and those of Banwell (2003) and Introna et al. (2005) show are that there are differences between the Chinese student and the Western student attitude towards plagiarism. The data is too little to conclusively show the extent of the difference or to draw generalisations applying to all Chinese students or, indeed, all Western students. In the current study the data has not been normalised against the

amount of teaching a student may, or may not, have received about plagiarism. Therefore, we are unable to judge the extent, if any, that the students surveyed were responding according to what they truly believed or what they thought was expected of them in a New Zealand university.

Of interest is that the data suggests that the attitude of many students, both Chinese and New Zealand, towards plagiarism in quite different from that of what we have been calling the Western academic paradigm as stated in the anti-plagiarism rules and regulations of many institutions and courses. Quite clearly, there are students who see it as good to plagiarise the teacher, or not to reference a book they've paraphrased. Very significantly, for about half the students, it is fine to cut and paste a whole article from the web and put it in an essay if it is acknowledged that this is what has been done. This last example raises the point raised by Introna et al (1995) and that is that there is some educational value in cutting and pasting. After all, if what a student has cut and paste is of relevance to the argument it shows that they have understood the taught material, thought about the argument they wish to put forth, have searched out relevant supporting material, and presented it in a logical fashion. Surely this is worth some credit?   If they have juxtaposed several sentences taken from different sources, and the essay makes sense, it shows even greater understanding and skill. Howard (1999) makes a similar case for "patchworking" to be considered a legitimate part of learning whereby students take whole sentences and paragraphs from a text and "paraphrase" by only changing a few words here and there. She points out that this is relatively common behaviour amongst academics.

This brief polemic challenges the academic to attempt to separate in their mind the actions of students which have little or no educational value and, possibly, are designed to deceive the lecturer in order to gain higher marks, and those actions which do have educational value and are true to a student's level of understanding and cultural background. Academics are also being challenged to consider what of their own paradigm is simply a product of their own culture and what has either absolute value and/or educational value?

Introna et al (2003) attributes to Pennycook (1996) the description of the ownership of texts as a Western Enlightenment idea. Before the enlightenment the basic paradigm was that inspiration and creativity was attributed to God and so literary work was often un-authored. The Enlightenment saw a paradigm shift to what we see today as the individual ownership of words. Copyright laws in the West were introduced in the 18th centaury (compared to 1984 in China).   Whilst some of the deconstructionist philosophies of the last few decades have challenged an author centred paradigm trying to replace it with a reader centred paradigm, they have not resulted in a new academic paradigm where the authorship is relatively irrelevant.

Outside of academia – the "real world" where students spend much of their time, the dominant Western plagiarism paradigm is much less stringent than within academia and this must cause confusion to the person coming from outside both paradigms. They will note that Western students, and others, very often download "pirated" music, videos, or software. They will note that in the media the original source of a story is not always noted. And they will see that incidents, such as when the New Zealand Prime Minister commissioned paintings, signed them, and then passed them off as her own, are largely ignored by the voting public. The academic and non-academic plagiarism paradigms are in tension. It is a big ask for the newly landed Chinese student to sort them out.

Values
Not surprisingly Chinese students have their own set of values. The results of this study give an initial baseline as to what those values are. It would be valuable to extend the CVS survey across a broader range of students and in greater numbers. Furthermore, it would be valuable to do longitudinal studies to see how a student's values change during their sojourn in New Zealand.

What the present study has done has highlighted that the students coming to New Zealand from China can not be placed into the Confucian Heritage Culture pot and assumed to have values that are substantially the same as other Chinese – either from China or migrants to New Zealand. It has shown that even a cohort of students in the 1990s in China have significantly different value priorities than the cohort of students being studied in New Zealand ten years later.

Of relevance is the fact that the value rated highest by the Chinese students was trustworthiness, a value in complete contrast with the whole idea of knowingly plagiarizing in an assignment. This would suggest that the students' ratings of the six scenarios presented to them were more an artefact of their lack of knowledge

of the inappropriateness of the suggested actions than of a desire to cheat by passing off the work of others as their own.

The numbers in the current survey were insufficient to correlate specific values to specific responses to the plagiarism scenarios. However, they do provide a starting point for those wishing to influence the behaviour of Chinese students. For example, a lecturer wanting students to follow a particular behaviour with respect to plagiarism may talk of giving students the opportunity to show that they are *trustworthy*, that referencing is an important sign of *courtesy* towards the author and teacher, and that it is expected the student will need to *persevere* in order to learn the system and pass the course as their parents expect them to (*filial piety*).

Acknowledgments

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