



# Institutional policies on plagiarism: The case of eight Chinese universities of foreign languages/international studies



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## ABSTRACT

Plagiarism is a major problem for universities worldwide and has been a constant cause of concern in higher education. Previous research has focused on Chinese students' attitudes toward, knowledge of, and engagement in plagiarism in Chinese and overseas educational contexts, and there is also a growing body of research on Chinese teachers' understandings of and stance on plagiaristic practices. However, little research attention has been given to institutional policies on plagiarism in the Chinese context, though similar research has been conducted in other settings. This paper reports on a study that examines the plagiarism policies made publicly available by eight major universities of foreign studies in mainland China. Both the structure and content of these universities' policy documents are analyzed to identify institutional understandings of, attitudes toward, and sanctions on plagiarism. The analysis reveals that despite inter-institutional variations, the policy documents are dominated by moralistic and regulatory discourses and are characterized by the conspicuous lack of an educative approach to plagiarism. We argue that such an institutional approach to plagiarism is unlikely to be effective because it largely fails to support students' acquisition of academic literacy and legitimate intertextual practices.

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## 1. Introduction

The past few decades have witnessed frequently reported increases in the incidence of plagiarism (Curtis & Vardanega, 2016; McCabe, 2005; Park, 2003) and, consequently, mounting concern about academic dishonesty (Clegg & Flint, 2006; Stuhmcke, Booth, & Wangmann, 2016; Wilkinson, 2009). Increasing media reports of “scandals” of cheating and plagiarism involving university students undermine public faith in the academic integrity of higher education and its members (Sutherland-Smith & Carr, 2005). As Park (2003) has noted, “the practice of plagiarism is a major challenge to institutional aspirations of academic integrity and a major threat to institutional quality assurance and enhancement” (p.483). In response to this spreading “moral panic” (Clegg & Flint, 2006, p.373), a growing body of research has examined the nature, prevalence, perceptions, causes, and consequences of plagiarism (e.g., Brown & Howell, 2001; Pecorari, 2001, 2013; Pecorari & Petrić, 2014; Yeo & Chien, 2007). Partly because of the influxes of Chinese students into Western universities (Gow, 2014) and partly because of the widespread assumptions that these students tend to be tolerant of, and are likely to engage in,

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plagiarism due to cultural and educational influences (Sapp, 2002), a significant segment of this research has focused on Chinese students' attitudes toward, knowledge of, and engagement in plagiarism in Chinese and overseas educational contexts (e.g., Bloch, 2012; Currie, 1998; Flowerdew & Li, 2007a; Hu & Lei, 2012; Li, 2013; Shi, 2004). There are also an increasing number of studies on Chinese teachers' understandings of and stance on plagiaristic practices (e.g., Hu & Lei, 2016; Hu & Sun, 2016).

Despite this rapidly growing body of research on Chinese teachers and students, little attention has been given to universities' policies on plagiarism in the Chinese context, though a sizeable number of studies have been conducted to investigate institutional policies and their efficacy in Western and other contexts (e.g., Brown & Howell, 2001; Larkham & Manns, 2002; Macdonald & Carroll, 2006; Pecorari, 2001; Sutherland-Smith, 2011). This lack of research about institutional policies on plagiarism in China is both surprising and conspicuous in view of the aforementioned assumptions about cultural and educational influences on Chinese students' intertextual practices (Sowden, 2005; Thompson & Williams, 1995) and the ever growing number of Chinese students on university campuses in many parts of the world (Gow, 2014). To facilitate these Chinese students' transition and adjustment to their academic expectations, it is important that host institutions be well informed of educational practices in the students' country of origin (Ireland & English, 2011) and their prior learning experiences with respect to plagiarism. A knowledge of Chinese universities' institutional policies on plagiarism can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how international students from China make sense of plagiarism, and how their previous educational contexts in China may have shaped their perceptions and practices. Unfortunately, there is a paucity of empirical research in this area that can be drawn on to develop such a knowledge. This paper intends to bridge the gap in our understanding of how plagiarism is framed and dealt with by Chinese universities. It reports on a study that examines policies on plagiarism (and academic misconduct in general) that are made publicly available by eight major universities of foreign languages or international studies in mainland China. We hope that the study can provide a window to understanding how the issue of plagiarism is problematized, explained, and responded to in Chinese universities, and yield findings that suggest ways in which institutional policies can be revised and improved for greater relevance and effectiveness. In the following section, we review extant research that motivated our research questions and analytic foci.

## 2. Previous research

### 2.1. Facets of plagiarism and studies of Chinese students/teachers

There is an extensive literature on the many facets of plagiarism that a variety of disciplines – from ethics studies to higher education to academic literacy – have contributed to. Park (2003) reviews a large number of studies on students' and teachers' understandings of plagiarism, attitudes and motivations in relation to plagiaristic behaviors, and the incidence of plagiarism. Flowerdew and Li (2007b) discuss various perspectives on plagiarism, including culture as a potential cause of plagiarism among second language writers, plagiarism as a developmental issue, disciplinary differences in perceptions of plagiarism, and teaching practices that could educate students about plagiarism. In their state-of-the-art review of the growing body of research on plagiarism in the field of second language writing, Pecorari and Petrić (2014) identify other salient themes in research on plagiarism, such as terminological distinctions regarding different forms of plagiarism, the role of textual plagiarism in language learning and a novice academic writer's development, and the influences of electronic media on trends of plagiarism. Institutional policies on plagiarism have also been explored for their common features and effectiveness in tackling plagiarism and upholding academic integrity (e.g., Macdonald & Carroll, 2006; Park, 2004; Pecorari, 2001; Price, 2002; Yamada, 2003). The findings of the existing work have indeed contributed to our greater understanding of the complexity, multifacetedness, and challenges of plagiarism as a perennial issue to grapple with in higher education around the globe.

With specific respect to Chinese students studying in home and overseas educational settings, previous research has yielded conflicting findings. Some studies (e.g., Liao & Tseng, 2010; Sapp, 2002; Valentine, 2006) reported that Chinese students had a stronger tendency than their counterparts in Western countries to tolerate or engage in writing practices that are widely regarded as unacceptable in English-speaking academia. This tendency was attributed in part or fully to culturally conditioned practices by some authors (e.g., Liao & Tseng, 2010; Matalene, 1985; Sapp, 2002; Sowden, 2005). Other studies (e.g., Hu & Lei, 2012, 2015), by contrast, found that although Chinese students did have different understandings from their Western counterparts of what would constitute illegitimate intertextual practices, they did not condone plagiarism – as a matter of fact, they held punitive attitudes toward identified cases of plagiarism. Similar findings have emerged from studies of Chinese university teachers (e.g., Hu & Sun, 2016; Lei & Hu, 2014, 2015). Furthermore, it has been found that the harshness of Chinese students' and teachers' attitudes toward plagiaristic practices correlated with their knowledge of transgressive intertextuality (i.e., conventionally illegitimate textual borrowing; see Borg, 2009), their academic writing competence, and their academic experiences (Hu & Lei, 2016; Hu & Sun, 2016). Of particular relevance to the present study is Gow (2014), an interview-based study that examined the cultural and developmental perspectives on plagiarism of a group of Chinese master's graduates of UK universities who returned to work in transnational education institutions in China. Gow found that the meanings of “plagiarism and the Chinese equivalents are dependent on the approach to knowledge, dominant forms of assessment and enforcement of academic integrity within the different educational contexts” (p.80). The complex connections among the various factors addressed in the aforementioned studies point to the need to examine and understand

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