TEACHING ACADEMIC INTEGRITY IN CHINA: A NEW UNIVERSITY CURRICULUM

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Abstract: This paper highlights the global issue of academic integrity, particularly in Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs). While policies and classes on integrity exist, comprehensive training opportunities are lacking. To address this, seminars targeting graduate students at one high-level research university in Shanghai have been initiated, aiming to foster competencies for international collaboration and ethical awareness. In the first seminar, various misconduct cases were discussed, including cheating on coursework, exam impersonation, and academic falsification in the Chinese higher education context. Reflecting on the issues and implications this seminar raised, this paper advocates for continued effort towards developing academic integrity training at Chinese HEIs, which would ultimately contribute to enhancing a culture of integrity in Chinese higher education [**].

Introduction

The institutionalization of academic integrity in Chinese colleges and universities began in the early 1980s, after China had fully implemented the reform and opening-up policy.[1] In 1983, the Chinese education authorities formulated *the Measures for the Management of Student Status in Full-time Ordinary Colleges and Universities*, which clarified the appropriate consequences for dealing with students' academic misconduct, for instance, cheating on examinations. This is seen as the beginning of the

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[1] It should be noted that lack of academic integrity is a global problem (Bretag, 2020; Curtis, 2023; Denisova-Schmidt, 2020; Eaton, 2024), and the recent hype over artificial intelligence (AI) has intensified discussions among scholars, practitioners, and other involved stakeholders (Bearman, et. al., 2023; Crompton and Burke, 2023; Howe, et. al., 2023; Khan, 2024).

institutionalization of academic integrity by China's national education authorities (Du, 2018). Over the last twenty years, China's Ministry of Education (MoE) has issued a series of regulations, opinions, approaches, guidelines, and other policies, which together make up the foundation of China's institutional system for governing academic misconduct in universities. A study focusing on the relevant policy documents issued by the MoE during the period from 2002 to 2016 shows that the effectiveness of China's policies on the governance of academic misconduct in colleges and universities has been continuously improving over the past decade or so. This can mainly be seen in the fact that the boundaries of the definition of academic misconduct have been continuously clarified, identifiability has been enhanced, and the normative requirements of the disclosure system for academic misconduct have been strengthened to incentivize HEIs to actively deal with the whistleblowing of academic misconduct (Hao et al., 2011).

The attention to academic integrity may largely be driven by the expansion and internationalization of higher education: both scholars and policy makers have realized that the further development of China's higher education and research system requires a healthy academic ecosystem (Wang & Cheng, 2014) - an important part of this is regulating academic (mis)behavior in HEIs. Major academic misconduct occurring in Chinese HEIs (in descending order of the number of people involved) includes academic plagiarism, academic forgery, misappropriation of other people's academic achievements, falsification of academic identities/curricula vitae, academic plagiarism, and embezzlement of research funds (Liu, 2018).

Scholars have identified a diverse set of reasons for the emergence of academic misconduct, including the pressure on faculty for quick success and profit as well as faculty members' own impetuousness and vainglory; the dereliction of duty by management and failure to supervise by some management departments and responsible persons; and the lack of sufficiently scientific and reasonable assessment and evaluation mechanisms for dealing with academic misconduct. Some scholars have also identified root causes including "weak professional self-regulation" and "poor academic socialization," noting that academia in China is a state-supported profession (Lo, 1991), dependent on the state as the main sponsor of research. Overall, the construction of an academic integrity system in Chinese higher education has not been an overnight success, but a gradual process towards perfection; this kind of change is always a work in progress (see more in Welch, 2020; Yang, 2022). Policies and regulations have been implemented to improve the understanding and practices of scholars and students in China, including classes on academic integrity and the ethics of AI; however, there are few systematic, organized, and comprehensive training opportunities targeting both undergraduate and graduate students at Chinese higher education institutions.

To address this gap, we are developing training materials on academic integrity aimed primarily at graduate students (both domestic and international) at one of the top universities in Shanghai[2] —that can be considered a starting point to help Chinese universities further develop their curriculums on these issues. We believe these seminars can equip graduate students with the necessary competencies for international

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[2] Our case university is one of the 211 Project universities. The 211 Project, along with Project 985 and the Double First-Class Project, is a national initiative to build academic excellence in China, funded by the Chinese government. The universities selected for these projects are considered the leading universities in China (for more on national excellence initiatives in China, see Yang, 2023, and more broadly Yudkevich, et al., 2023).

collaborations and studying or working abroad. Moreover, the proposed seminars offer opportunities for other international stakeholders, including scholars and professors as well as international students, university administrators, and policymakers, all of whom would benefit from insights into academic integrity from the Chinese perspective.

While this is still a work in progress, we would like to share some insights. First, it is crucial to define some common terms, such as *academic integrity*, *contract cheating*, and *plagiarism*, including definitions in the national language of China, that are sometimes taken for granted, especially in the international context. Second, such seminars (if they are well designed and have an appropriate atmosphere) can offer opportunities for critical (self-)reflections and exchanges of ideas. Finally, it is important to bring to the table (recent) local, national, and international cases from different perspectives by considering possible risks in both the short and long term. This paper focuses on local (national) aspects and presents cases of misbehavior in higher education that reflect the perspectives of graduate students at one very selective university in Shanghai.

Academic misconduct from the students' perspective

The first seminar was held in April 2024. Selected graduate students (both international and domestic, majoring in Chinese as a foreign language; n=30) were invited to attend the seminar. After an interactive lecture with many examples, students were asked several questions, including what kinds of cases they had personally observed, heard about from classmates, and/or read about in the media in the recent past. The students were divided into small groups (n=6) and, after intensive discussions, presented these results in the plenum. It should be noted that the entire event took place in English, a foreign language for both the lecturer and the students (see more about English-language instruction in non-Anglophone countries in Unangst, Altbach and Hans de Wit, 2022 and Denisova-Schmidt, 2023). Three takeaways have emerged from this seminar.

Universities struggle to monitor cheating in sport

A 211 Project university in Shanghai, like many other Chinese universities, offers a physical education course that all students are required to take. The assessment requirement for this course is to run 40 km within the campus in one semester, and the weekly running mileage can add up to only 8 km (other Chinese universities require 60 km per month or 2 km per day). The original intention of the university in setting this requirement was to help students develop good exercise habits by running for 4-5 weeks in a row. However, given the size of the campus and the fact that students live in different dormitories, it is difficult to conduct a face-to-face assessment for each student. Therefore, the university adopted electronic devices to monitor students' completion (e.g., using their cell phone locations to check the number of miles they ran on campus). However, because this method of assessment lacked more rigorous monitoring tools, and especially because monitoring the online data did not allow course designers to see how students really exercised, some students rode their bikes[3] on campus rather than running.

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[3] This university has wonderful opportunities for bike riders, and many students move around the campus on bicycles. It is possible to rent a bicycle using a special bike-sharing app; the monthly fee is 18 yuan (2.50

This is a kind of cheating in disguise.

The main reason that students are able to get away with fulfilling the requirements of the physical education course using these kinds of tricks is that the focus of the course is encouragement/guidance rather than competition. The universities' aim in offering this kind of course is to encourage students to be physically active. Because the students' daily cycling can be considered a form of exercise, both the universities and students look the other way. This course also does not have a substantial impact on students' grades and GPA. This case is an example of how the level of attention and measures taken by the universities are binding on the students to comply with the relevant rules and regulations and academic requirements.

Vigilance is necessary to guard against evolving academic misconduct

During a final exam, a student (hereafter referred to as Student A) asked a student from another university (Student B) to take an exam for him. Student B entered the exam room with Student A's ID card. Because this incident happened during the pandemic, when all students were wearing masks to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in China, the invigilator did not initially notice the problem. After the exam papers were distributed, Student B did not fill in the semester information (1st, 2nd, or 3rd semester) because he was not clear about the semester system at that particular university, which is unique among universities in China in adopting a three-semester system. Finally, after being reminded by the invigilator, Student B hesitantly wrote "2nd semester." However, it was already the third semester at the time of the exam, so the invigilator discovered that Student B was a substitute. After this incident, Student A was severely punished by the university for hiring a substitute to take the test.

Unlike the situation described in the previous subsection, this case exemplifies the determination of the university to fight against cheating on examinations. This particular case shows that finding substitutes for exams undermines the fairness of education, jeopardizes the interests of other students, and more seriously, causes a lot of damage to the university's learning culture.

The end of a popular actor's career leads to attempts to mitigate fraud in dissertations

Ronald Zhai is a very talented young actor in China's film and television industry, who has created many affecting and influential screen roles. He is also one of the few highly educated people in this field, having earned a doctorate from the Beijing Film Academy, one of China's most prestigious film and television talent training colleges. In China's film and television industry, a high level of education has never been a top priority. The vast majority only have bachelor's degrees, and many don't even have that.

January 31, 2019: Zhai showed a postdoctoral acceptance letter from the Guanghua School of Management at Peking University (a Top 2 research university in China; ranked T30 globally in ARWU)

February 8, 2019: The authenticity of Zhai's doctorate degree was questioned because he did not know what CNKI (the Chinese version of the WoS literature database) was when questioned by the audience of his live internet show. Almost all academic

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USD). Without a subscription, the fare is 1-2 yuan (0.10 USD) per ride.

papers published in authoritative Chinese academic journals are included in CNKI (https://www.cnki.net/), and one of the prerequisites for obtaining a doctoral degree from a prestigious university in China includes the publication of high-quality academic papers in authoritative journals. Anyone with such a degree would know about this database.

February 11, 2019: The Beijing Film Academy, the university where Zhai obtained his doctoral degree, set up a committee and launched an investigation in accordance with relevant procedures. Peking University's Guanghua School of Management issued a statement saying it would wait for the findings of the Beijing Film Academy before deciding whether it would continue to offer Zhai a postdoctoral position.

February 15, 2019: The Chinese Ministry of Education expressed concern over Zhai's alleged academic misconduct and urged the relevant authorities to speed up the verification process.

February 16, 2019: Peking University issued a statement on its investigation of the hiring of Ronald Zhai as a postdoctoral fellow, confirming that Zhai committed academic misconduct, agreeing that Zhai would give up his postdoctoral post, and instructing the Guanghua School of Management to profoundly review its recruitment process.

February 19, 2019: The Beijing Film Academy released a statement on the progress of the investigation of "Zhai's suspected academic misconduct" and other issues, announcing the revocation of Zhai's doctoral degree and cancellation of his doctoral thesis advisor's (Prof. Chen) supervisor qualification (which disqualified him from recruiting new doctoral students for the next few years).

This incident has had long-lasting effects: The Chinese Ministry of Education has further strengthened its review and supervision of the dissertations of Chinese university graduates, including those graduates who have been out of university for a few years, and enacted repeat spot checks to ensure that plagiarism and other academic misconduct no longer occur. This demonstrates the seriousness of China's universities in combating academic misconduct as well as their zero-tolerance for academic thesis forgery. This incident has exposed, to a certain extent, loopholes in the enrollment and talent cultivation of some universities. It has also raised critical questions about whether the professional institutions involved, as degree-granting units, conducted a standardized assessment of Zhai's academic performance and what kinds of criteria they used to grant him a doctoral degree and provide him with a postdoctoral position.

Reflecting on the seminar, it was noteworthy that the students actively engaged in discussing this specific case. This highlights the value of incorporating real-life experiences into our seminars, as they not only stimulate student participation but also help them connect critical issues to their own understanding.

Conclusion and outlook

Our ongoing exploration of academic integrity in the context of higher education, particularly at one top university with rapid development in Shanghai, has yielded several noteworthy insights. First, the need to clearly define common terms such as *academic integrity*, *contract cheating*, and *plagiarism*, especially in an international context where interpretations may vary, cannot be overemphasized. Establishing common understandings is fundamental to fostering a culture of academic honesty. Second, these arrangements also provide opportunities for both students and faculty to

review the evolving nature of academic misconduct and reflect on the necessary actions and oversight. Finally, as exemplified by our examination of misconduct cases at one top university in Shanghai, the presentation of recent local and national (and even international) cases provides practical insights into the challenges facing institutions. These real-world examples underscore the importance of addressing academic misconduct from both a short- and long-term perspective. Our ongoing efforts underscore the multifaceted nature of academic integrity and the importance of ongoing dialogue, reflection, and proactive measures to safeguard the integrity of higher education institutions. By addressing these challenges head-on and implementing robust strategies, we can attempt to foster an environment conducive to genuine learning and scholarly excellence.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The authors affirm this research did not involve human subjects.