

Reply to Dilin Liu

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Dilin Liu's article constitutes a welcome contribution to the debate regarding the role of culture in plagiarism. I am ready to accept his argument that plagiarism has been declared an unacceptable practice in institutions of higher education in China, and that students are explicitly urged to avoid it. It is always difficult, though, for an outsider to judge whether such pronouncements by the Chinese authorities reflect and give voice to existing attitudes and practice in society, or are specifically intended to compensate for their absence. Moreover, while there is government censorship of scholars on matters such as the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Square Massacre (see *History Today* December 2003), one will naturally be suspicious of proclaimed notions of academic independence. Government censorship must surely tend to foster a conformist mind-set anxious to mirror rather than challenge official opinions. This clearly does not lead to plagiarism *per se*, but it does favour an attitude in which reproduction rather than deconstruction of acknowledged authorities is regarded as a virtue.

If we accept Liu's conclusions, we must effectively dismiss cultural conditioning as a contributing factor, which seems counter-intuitive. In fact, Liu seems to recognize that there is a cultural component in the kind of plagiarism under discussion, but feels unable to pursue the matter ('... what constitutes the main reason for plagiarism among Asian students goes beyond the space and scope of this article'). Here I must simply turn to my own classroom experiences running a foundation course in Britain. In a recent journal entry, one of my students wrote: 'In China I was very good at History, but the exam was so boring because you have to recite everything, not write your opinion about things or discuss them. Now this subject is more interesting, you can learn it very quickly'. On my questioning him, he and other Chinese students affirmed that reproducing what a teacher or textbook stated was allowed, indeed expected, without any concern for plagiarism. The context was secondary school, to which Liu does not explicitly refer, but just prior to university entry. Of course, as Liu observes, we should beware of conflating learning style with the question of plagiarism, and of making unwarranted jumps in reasoning, yet it seems unlikely that the two are not connected.

As Liu observes, my analysis highlights the possible role of culture in plagiarism, yet my solution is related to language. This contradiction, though, is more apparent than real. In order to raise awareness of

cultural pre-disposition and to seek to modify its academic consequences, practical language activity is probably the most effective. It ultimately empowers the student instead of just providing them with a critique of their own practice. Asking students who are not used to giving their opinions to make an original presentation on a given topic is both a cultural and a linguistic exercise.