

A Letter about Plagiarism by Professor Steve Stearns (Yale)

Posted on [December 21, 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 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 the 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

Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology
Yale University

翻译：Ent

致2007年秋季我在北京的学生：

今天批阅论文的时候，我又遇到了两例剽窃行为。一例手法老练但是情节严重，另一例则是厚颜无耻得令人难以置信。这样总计就有三名学生因为剽窃而在我的课程中不及格。

假如我前些时候没有警告过你们，并给你们一次机会去诚实地改正你们的文章，这种事情还会多好几例。有些同学诚实地告诉了我他们都抄袭了哪些部分，我向他们表示感谢。

这些剽窃行为让我非常苦恼，不但因为它损害了你我之间的师生关系，也因为告诉了您一些关于北大、关于中国的事情，而这些事情是您我都不愿意听到的。

它伤害了我们之间的关系，因为我为了当一名好老师而付出了许多努力。我花了许多时间准备课堂讲授，又花了许多时间给你们的文章写下详尽的反馈。这些工作都很辛苦。你无法想象，当改到第500篇文章的细节的时候你是什么感觉，除非你亲身经历。我做这一切

，是为了让你们学会更清晰地思考问题，学会有说服力地表达自己的观点，学会培养自己的理性，锻炼自己理解世界的能力。我做这一切，也因为我珍视你们，珍视你们的想法，

而且我想，如果你们都能够清晰地思考、明智地行动的话，这个世界也会变得更加美好。

在以后的人生道路里，你们当中有的人会成为身居要位的领导，我希望你们能够德才兼备，因为无德无才的领导者所能带来的可怕灾难，我已经见过太多了。就算不当领导，我也

希望你们所有人都能在你们的生命中创造一些有价值的东西，无论你们最后从事什么。而如果你欺骗的话，你是做不到这一点的。

当我所教的学生从别人那里偷窃话语和思想的时候，我感到受了欺骗，心情沉重如同跋涉泥沼。我会问自己，我为什么要给那些存心欺骗我的人上课呢？生命是如此的短暂，太不值得。有比这好得多的事情可以做。

让人不安的是，剽窃已经成为整个中国行为模式的一部分。中国忽视国际知识产权。比如说，复印我的书彻头彻尾违反了国际版权协议，使我损失了收入，对我而言近乎直接的偷窃，然而北大人却对此安之若素。再比如，我只花大约一美元就能在街头和店铺买到DVD光碟，这些碟片在别国要卖上二三十美元。创作它们的艺术家因此损失的大笔收入全是被偷走的，每年几十亿。因为生产劣质商品对消费者造成潜在的健康威胁而不得不召回，中国已经是臭名昭著了。最近美国报纸上刊载的一幅漫画描绘了中央委员会被指责侵犯人权。猜他们怎么回答？“往他们牙膏里搁点东西，看他们还敢吭声不？”经济繁荣的背后，

腐败已经成为严重的问题。就拿矿业来说，每年大约有五千名矿工死去，就因为矿主为了省事为了利润而不惜违反法律。（译注：cut corners 指贬义的抄近道，此为意译。）

矿主的贪婪导致工人死去，象征着社会阶层之间纽带的断裂。天道已丧。

中国似乎已经迷失了她的道路。孔子说过，己所不欲勿施于人。他还说过，人而无信不知

其可。(直译是君子有信，不过一时想不起原话是怎么说的了。) 诚实互惠是信任与社群的基础。在一个充满欺诈和背叛的社会中，我们无法生存，这样的世界成了霍布森式的“每个人与每个人为敌”的战争，险恶而野蛮。若是我们不能相信别人发表的东西，我们就没法做科研。谁都没有理由去企图重复一个不可信的结果，不值得费那功夫；而没有重复就不会有经过验证而可信赖、可共享的知识，也就没有科学。没有科学就不会有技术，没有技术就不会有生产力的稳步发展，经济水平的持续增长，也就不会给所有人都带来更美好的生活。

在你们今后的人生里，剽窃将会遇到极为严厉的惩罚。身为研究生如果剽窃，就会直接开除，没有学位。身为教员如果剽窃，就会丢掉饭碗。我知道你们可能不信，因为北大那位把整本书翻成中文就署上自己名字出版的社会学家仅仅丢了行政职务，却仍然保有教授之位和薪水。然而事情在别处并非如此。在美国如果发现有人剽窃，此人的职业生涯可以就此毁于一旦。欧洲亦然。

我在北大遇见了如此之多的剽窃，这一事实说明了其它教授和行政官员的所作所为。他们必然是对此颇为容忍，而当发现有人剽窃时，他们未加严厉惩罚就遮掩过去，很可能是因为他们不愿丢脸。假如他们真的施以惩罚，剽窃决不会这么猖獗。

给你们当中一些人上课的时候，我感受到了极大的喜悦。我在这里遇到的年轻的头脑，和

世界上任何地方比起来都毫不逊色。你们当中许多人都很勇敢，大部分人都很努力，大部分人都很诚实，有些人相当聪明。然而当我离去时，心情是复杂的。这么多前途无量的中国年轻人认为要靠作弊才能成功，让我十分伤心。比起那些被他们窃走思想的人，和那些被他们用窃来的的话语所欺骗的人，他们伤害得还要多的，是他们自己。

This entry was posted in [in Chinese](#), [In English](#), [news](#) by [Rui Guo](#).