

# Who should be held accountable? An analysis of academic misconduct cases in Chinese higher education and the challenges of the transformative process

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**Abstract:** There are numerous issues in Chinese academic research environment at present, such as the lack of basic laws to govern academic misconduct and the scholars' utilitarian approaches to conducting research. These issues will not only seriously waste national resources, but also may cause the country's comprehensive national power and international competitiveness decreased and impede the development of society. This essay illustrates the academic misconduct in China and claims that higher education should take responsibility for this. Specifically, it analyses several academic misconduct cases and highlights some challenges in the transformative process.

**Key words:** higher education; academic misconduct; academic freedom; transformative higher education

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## 1 Introduction

Since 2019, there have been an increasing number of scholars involved in academic misconduct cases in China annually, and it can be seen that academic misconduct is becoming intensified in China [1]. According to Huang et al. and Wang, the majority of supervision and prevention of academic misconduct in China is researched by publishing companies and editors [2][3]. While the government strictly investigates such behaviour, it can be observed that there is no social organization defined to be responsible for academic misconduct. Higher education, in the role of disseminating, transferring, transforming and creating knowledge, should effectively prevent and supervise academic misconduct [4]. Due to the lack of relevant research, many Chinese scholars are unaware of their academic misconduct, and even some institutions have taken "shortcuts" in doing academic research for granted [5][6].

With the development of technology, an evolution of common academic misconduct has taken place from data falsification and using false literature to the use of artificial intelligence to generate articles [7]. Such non-rigorous academic research is opposed to the development goals of the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI) [8]. Therefore, higher education in China requires transformative change instead of improvement, in terms of conducting academic [9][10]. Furthermore, how to effectively prevent and supervise different types of academic misconduct could be an issue [11]. Consequently, academic misconduct might be an extremely valuable theme for further research in China [6]. This essay will illustrate academic misconduct in China and claim that higher education should take responsibility for this. Specifically, it will analyse several academic misconduct cases and highlight some challenges in the transformative process.

## 2 The Research role of higher education

The public roles of higher education include educator, researcher, and service provider, with the researcher role being intended to promote social sustainability [12][13]. Specifically, academic research can provide ideas and evidence for social development trends along with scientific and technological innovations [14]. According to Smolentseva, the social contribution of the researcher's role creates reputation and prestige for higher education [4]. However, some people argue that academic research has been commodified by neoliberalism [15]. This is because academics will obtain financial and academic status through the publication of academic findings, and these benefits drive many academics down the path of academic misconduct [16][6].

## 3 Analysis of academic misconduct cases in Chinese higher education

Case I: The negligence of higher education institutions in managing the duplication rate of dissertations

In February 2019, Chinese actor Tianlin Zhai caused a public sensation when he inadvertently asked his fans what "CNKI" was during a live broadcast [17]. This is because CNKI is the most authoritative online database in China, and Zhai is one of the few famous actors in China who holds a PhD degree, and he was engaged in post-doctoral research at Peking University at the time [18]. Upon investigation, only one article of 3,000 words was published in a non-core journal during Zhai's doctoral studies, and this article had a high repetition rate of 39.4% [17]. This academic scandal triggered reflection and discussion in Chinese universities because of the celebrity effect [19]. Subsequently, as a result of this incident, Zhai's doctoral graduation institution, Beijing Film Academy, only has requirements on the repetition rate of the dissertation and does not have any explicit requirements on the papers published during the students' master's and doctoral degrees [20].

It reveals to some extent that there are many problems in the current academic research environment in China [18]. For example, how are the articles with such a high repetition rate accepted by journals and databases? In addition to the publishing department, higher education institutions, the researchers' training and management department, should also be responsible for such false academic results [20]. After this case, China's Ministry of Education issued two consecutive official documents to regulate and strengthen the enrolment and management of higher education [18]. However, due to the lack of basic laws governing academic misconduct, strict regulations and rules seemed to have little effect in the presence of deep-rooted perceptions and relationships of interest [6]. There are still various cases of academic misconduct emerging after this incident [1].

Case II: Higher education tutors threaten students and commit academic falsification

On 26 January 2024, 11 PhD and MSc students from Huazhong Agricultural University reported their supervisor, Feiruo Huang, for academic misconduct [21]. A pdf document of 125 pages listed in detail 15 journal papers and 19 dissertations that Huang had participated in and supervised during his Master's and PhD supervisions for academic misconduct, including falsifying experimental data, faking experimental images, inappropriately signing dissertations, manipulating peer reviews, and plagiarising in textbook writing [22]. For instance, he threatened a student to write the experimental data and photos of proteins in rat livers as those of pigs, or he would delay the student's graduation. In addition, Huang also asked students to draft their own review comments, which Huang would then give to peer reviewers with whom he had an interested relationship. There are even some of Huang's students who have never done experiments but keep publishing papers with experiments (Ibid).

In addition, it is notable that Huang has presided over many national key research programmes, and his research projects were supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China [23]. It could be argued that his academic misconduct not only wasted the national funds and the research ability of his students but also impeded the development of

academic research in China. Therefore, it could be seen that the rectification of academic misconduct in Chinese higher education is of great significance to Chinese society [6][10]. Moreover, there exist many other tutors like Huang, as in 2020 a student reported Yuqing Zhang, a tutor at Tianjin University, for academic misconduct [24]. However, the relevant authorities only punished Zhang by cancelling his eligibility to apply for the National Natural Science Foundation of China for five years [22]. It could be assumed that China's efforts to combat academic misconduct are insufficient and it is difficult for higher education institutions to control the authenticity of research on academics [10].

Case III: The pitfalls of generative AI for academic research by higher education scholars

In March 2024, it was revealed that Yangai Liu, a professor at China University of Geosciences, was suspected of publishing an article in Elsevier's journal *Surfaces and Interfaces* written by ChatGPT [25]. This is because the first sentence of the article is "Certainly, here is a possible introduction for your topic", which is commonly used by ChatGPT [26]. According to Wang, the appearance of generative AI like ChatGPT may cause a huge impact on the field of academic research [7]. An informal poll at Stanford University in the United States showed that a significant number of students admitted to using ChatGPT in their final assessments [27].

However, whether using ChatGPT in academic research constitutes academic misconduct is currently a heated topic in the international community [28]. Hou and Li suggested that based on the *Measures for Preventing and Dealing with Academic Misconduct in Higher Education Institutions* issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education, the use of ChatGPT generators in academic research may constitute two types of academic misconduct: plagiarism, copying, misappropriation of other people's academic achievements, and ghostwriting by others [29]. This is because plenty of ideas and content in ChatGPT-generated papers come from papers written by others, but their transcoding process hides the fact of plagiarism [7]. Moreover, ChatGPT makes up and generates incorrect texts as well as references, which is a fatal drawback for academic research, and it is difficult for students to identify the authenticity of those contents [30]. Therefore, it could be a challenge for higher education to combat the impact of generative AI on traditional academics [27].

#### **4 The impact of academic misconduct on Chinese society**

As stated above, academic misconduct has a negative impact on Chinese society [27]. Firstly, false research methods are a waste of national resources and impede the development and progress of the society, which means that it will slow down or even suspend the development of industries [6]. Secondly, invalid research achievements would damage the academic environment, which may mislead the research direction of future scholars or even make Chinese scholars gradually lose their research ability [18]. Moreover, an incorrect talent cultivation model may reduce the country's comprehensive national power and international competitiveness [6]. Therefore, higher education should play a more positive and intervening role in exploring methods to effectively govern academic misconduct [31].

#### **5 The challenges of transformative academic misconduct in Chinese higher education**

##### **5.1 The missing academic spirit of scholars**

Academic spirit is an essential motivator for academic research activities, which enables scholars to maintain a critical and reverent attitude in conducting research to ensure the discipline of academic research [32] [33]. However, the academic pressure seems to have caused some university teachers to lose their academic spirit. According to Li, Chinese higher education institutions are mostly dominated by administrative management, and researchers only serve as tools to implement commands [34]. This might lead to the scholars gradually losing their independent personality and academic spirit, and academic research in China has become to utilitarianism [35]. This is because the academic assessment of teachers in universities only counts the number of research projects and papers published, which makes many scholars pursue utilitarianism and engage in academic falsification [34]. Even some universities harboured teachers and students

with academic misconduct for the sake of social reputation and school influence and never took the initiative to investigate [6]. However, such numbers cannot reflect their academic contributions and higher education should assess academic contributions based on practical sustainable development goals [8]. Therefore, it could be a great challenge to break this incorrect academic management structure and develop academic spirit among scholars [10].

### 5.2 Defining the scope of academic misconduct

According to Hou and Li, the *Measures for the Prevention and Handling of Academic Misconduct in Higher Education Institutions* issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education do not have uniform rules for the identification of academic misconduct, and the treatment of academic misconduct varies from institution to institution [29]. Moreover, due to the unclear concept of academic misconduct in Chinese higher education, there are many students not aware of their academic misconduct [33]. Specifically, to what extent the use of AI will be recognized as academic misconduct and in which step of academic research it could be used [3]. However, it also remains a controversial issue worldwide [28]. Therefore, defining the scope of academic misconduct, especially for the use of generative AI, is an exceptionally difficult challenge for transformative Chinese higher education at this stage [30].

## 6 Conclusion

In conclusion, there are numerous issues in Chinese academic research environment at present, such as the lack of basic laws to govern academic misconduct and the scholars' utilitarian approaches to conducting research [35]. These issues would waste the national resources seriously, which may cause the country's comprehensive national power and international competitiveness decreased and impede the development of society [6]. Consequently, Chinese higher education should focus on the academic misconduct of both professors and students and explore methods that can effectively prevent and supervise it [11].

However, how to cultivate academic spirit for scholars and define the scope of academic misconduct might be difficult in this transformative change [29][34]. Therefore, exploring appropriate academic management structures for higher education as well as establishing policies for academic misconduct governance can be considered crucial directions for further research in China.

### Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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