THE ALLURE OF DIGITAL PIRACY: CONVENIENCE VS ACADEMIC COPYRIGHT IN CHINESE HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract. This article explores if students in Chinese Higher Education (HE) understand the importance of academic intellectual property rights. It questions postgraduate scholars' perspectives regarding copyright and the stealing of eBooks online, debating whether they feel copyright and publisher pay walling conflicts with freedom of knowledge needed to learn. Copyright in China dates to the Song dynasty (960-1279), with a modern code to prevent intellectual property theft implemented in 1910, refined in 1928 and extended to cover works of foreigners. Yet, several studies indicate piracy is prevalent in China, via popular engagement with imitation luxury brands and bootleg digital material. This article, then, approaches this phenomenon by drawing insight from qualitative research undertaken through focus groups and ethnographic research with 103 postgraduates in a Sino-British Higher Education Institute (HEI) in China. The findings show students understood the importance of respecting intellectual property but noted a tension between following it and succeeding in their academic pursuits. The article concludes by suggesting that this insight can encourage Chinese HE policymakers to reflect on resource availability for students in Chinese HEIs.

Keywords: *higher education, digital piracy, cheating, academic integrity, copyright, pedagogy*

Introduction

The behaviour of students engaged in Chinese higher education (HE), regarding digital piracy and intellectual rights, is a complex issue. It is rooted in discussions over freedom to access knowledge, political censorship, predatorial publishing and digital accessibility, which all prevail as challenges in modern mainland China. Meanwhile, suggesting students engage in digital piracy for simple convenience, or just to save money, often used to explain away cybercrime, ignores important narratives beyond those we would expect, built around learning survival (Day, 2024a; 2024b). Therefore, there is room for investigation of whether digital piracy is an appropriate and justified evil, and to debate the extent of student awareness as to whether their piracy acts negate and neglect academic intellectual rights. Subsequently, this article sets out to establish if students who engage in digital piracy, or are aware of it, can rationalise ethical debates around the issue. Moreover, through this, the article investigates if such students can clearly articulate understanding about the behaviour, alongside what impact it has on academic authors and their own academic integrity. Put another way, this article asks if students are stuck between a rock and a hard place, driven, far too often, in their study by the political dynamics of academic publishing and the prevalence of piracy across China. Meanwhile, it considers whether a social predisposition towards piracy carries forward any desire, or intellectual awareness amongst learners, about copyright and integrity in HE. It has been shown that students rely on digital piracy to access knowledge to pass coursework requirements (Day, 2024b). This creates a vicious cycle whereby electronic books (eBooks) are increased in cost to offset loss of earning.

The intersection of digital piracy, academic integrity, and student attitudes in Chinese HE presents a significant area for further exploration and consideration. This article,

therefore, raises questions about the impact of cultural norms, educational systems, and technological advancements on students perceptions and behaviours regarding intellectual property rights. Presently, we seek efforts to address this issue including educational campaigns, stricter enforcement of copyright laws, and promoting ethical behaviour among students. As shown, through discussion here, fostering a culture of respect for academic intellectual rights, and raising awareness about the consequences of digital piracy, ensures institutions can help shape responsible academic practice amongst Chinese HE students. Ultimately, however, finding a balance between convenience and reflecting ethical and intellectual property considerations is crucial, when navigating the complex landscape of digital piracy in HE. It requires, this article contends, better collaboration between educators, university policymakers, and students to promote a culture of integrity and respect for intellectual property rights, in learning settings. To this end, a research question was formed that asked: RQ1: To what extent do Chinese university students understand intellectual property rights and weigh these rights in their decisions to pirate content for academic learning?

Review of literature

Framed in one light, the decision of students to steal digital copies of books online could indicate inclination towards disregarding academic integrity; after all, as students engaged in higher learning, they are aware of both the importance and value of knowledge. Meanwhile, they are taught about respecting the rights of authors, seen in the emphasis of, for example, citing academic literature correctly to recognise the contributions of others. Accessing digital content online, for free, hence pirating it from websites that facilitate this demonstrates a polar inclination towards best practice. Indeed, academic malpractice, amongst students, is a growing concern, especially due to the transformative impact of technologies, whilst higher degrees of digital literacy are shown to help students navigate complex and geopolitically authoritarian nations (Aye et al., 2023; Day and Skulsuthavong, 2021). However, social practices can shape deeper cognitive processes and habits, meaning that if students learn to digitally pirate books to support learning needs, this can easily bleed into other aspects of their decision making and life (Scott et al., 2020). Indeed, as AI technologies become ever more prevalent and deployable in learning settings, it is likely that such decisions will increasingly be augmented by technical efficiency, speed, and co-constructed thinking with machines (Low et al., 2022). The power of the Internet, and the subsequent freedoms afforded by it, in particular uncensored access to knowledge and freedom of expression, condition young people. Yet, especially for those in authoritarian nations, breaking of local, physical, and domestic laws, through open participation in a domain without geographical boundaries, is now commonplace (Day and Skulsuthavong, 2021).

The reality, however, is that students, especially those from Asian heritage backgrounds, face complex and considerable pressures that uniquely situate their learning experiences within universities. Whether it is residency in crowded dormitories, or multi-generational homes, students in China are shown to have little privacy and personal space, which impacts their study habits (Day, 2024a; 2024b). Such study habits already align, in several ways, to controversial practices normalised within the Chinese HE educational landscape. Given this, it is intriguing to establish whether students within the sample studied in this article, so those engaged within postgraduate education in a Chinese HE university, demonstrate awareness of integrity and academic copyright as being related factors to piracy. Assessing, then, the range of

discussions and debates about academic integrity within China, as well as copyright within broader sociocultural phenomena, offers insight into the practices of students. One well-established area of scholarship considers contract cheating in essay writing for academic coursework, which is also known as ghostwriting or ghost authorship. This describes the practice of Chinese students outsourcing their academic work to third parties, who complete the assignments on their behalf, and may even submit the essays for students. This form of academic misconduct has become a growing concern in higher education globally, so it is not just limited to China. However, within Chinese HE there are many reports of students using online services, and sophisticated social media networks, to engage in contract cheating, reducing accurate interpretation of their ability, a problem that increases if they are in settings where they are forced to study in languages other than their own, often also motivated by a desire to receive good grades whilst sensing vulnerabilities in a universities detection of such cheating (Wang and Xu, 2021).

Convenience, then, appears to be a driving factor in Chinese students taking less legitimate routes to support their study (Curtis and Vardanega, 2016; Clarke and Lancaster, 2013). Moreover, the role of the Internet in facilitating such practices has been shown to be a factor driving students' willingness to break rules, to facilitate, provide access or empower their study (Eret and Ok, 2014). Scholastic dishonesty, however, takes route in the earliest days of degree study, which influences future practices should graduates become academics themselves (Fanelli, 2009; Eve and Bromley, 1981). Students who are learning in a system of thought whereby normative practices exist around academic dishonesty, so those who are exposed to norms of academic malpractice daily, may be more likely, then, to disregard the concepts of academic copyright and intellectual property by stealing books from the Internet. This isnt a new idea. Hilbert (1988; 1987; 1985) established a longitudinal perspective suggesting that academic dishonesty was especially problematic and had a bleeding effect on clinical and professional behaviours. Both academic misconduct and digital piracy of eBooks, to facilitate learning, involves unethical practices that undermine academic integrity principles. Contract cheating, for example, impacts lecturers ability to accurately measure student performance, while piracy violates the underpinning academic intellectual rights of the authors who shaped the work then stolen. In one sense, contract cheating often involves dishonest use of intellectual property, notably when students pay others to complete their assignments, or download them from re-sellers who provide template structures. Similarly, academic piracy involves illegally distributing copyrighted materials like eBooks and journal articles without permission, often to enable learning (Day, 2024a). Moreover, the common linking factor of the Internet, in facilitating academic deviance, of any form, is made possible due to the decentralised infrastructure the World Wide Web (the Web) is built upon; nobody owns it, and it is difficult to enforce legality on it, especially in a closed network system, such as mainland China (Day, 2024b).

This means that online platforms and services have emerged, within the Internet, that have catalysed the growth of both contract cheating, alongside essay mills, and academic piracy, suggesting both together create a phenomenon disregarding of academic intellectual rights, and student learning responsibilities. However, there are equal arguments that suggest commercialisation of higher educational teaching, which increase student roll numbers to several hundred in a single class, rapid and unchecked expansion of western universities in countries such as China, as well as predatory,

alongside pay-walled, journals impacting open-access to knowledge, which all could be driving academic malpractice, piracy, and contract cheating (Day, 2024b; Jamali and Nabavi, 2015). Yet, both practices open students up to risks beyond academic consequences, because the business and commodified nature of both piracy websites, and contract cheating systems, may include other criminal practices, exposing students to potential blackmail, fraud, identity theft, and other financial crimes due to those who operating such grey markets being outside of conventional law (Ellis et al., 2018).

Meanwhile, due to students perceiving engaging in such practices as low risk they may underestimate the ability of universities to detect their practices, hence choosing perceived convenience without realistically understanding that they can be caught for violating academic policies. The consequences are not small for universities either. For example, when group legal action challenged and sued five US university libraries, part of the HathiTrust project to make available 7,000,000 eBooks for the purposes of study, for allegedly violating copyright (Flood, 2011). Most action, it seems, is dedicated towards holding universities, rather than students themselves, to account for the redistribution and violation of academic copyright, for example when Oxford University Press sued Delhi University in 2013 for the distribution of course packs that contained published content (Leigh, 2013). Responsibility, it seems, rests with academics and scholars to uphold academic copyright and intellectual property. However, this responsibility seems distributed at best. Arguments have been put forward that suggest students from developing nations need to steal books online to complete their studies successfully, due to the high costs faced in buying books (Day, 2024a). However, there is equally a need to consider building academic copyright discussions into the formative training of students within university, as part of their digital skills practices. Indeed, it has been suggested that such skills are underdeveloped amongst students, a problem intensified by the emergence of digital technologies that makes it more difficult to ensure students are following good academic integrity protocols (Pfannenstiel, 2010).

Part of the challenge emerges because no universal definition, or subsequent interpretation, exists about what digital literacy is, should be taught as, or how it pertains, ironically, to practices around literature usage, deployment, and distribution within universities (Bawden, 2008). Digital literacy, and its relationship to the Internet and cheating, has been explored across numerous studies, with more suggesting that connection to social media platforms and the relative ease alongside lack of immediate accountability facilitated by their anonymity inclines students towards cheating and dishonest practices through technologies. The extent to which digital literacy truly affects the planned behaviour of academic misconduct is open to debate, with some suggesting that ICT skills have little impact on the decision-making process (Trushell et al., 2013). However, this seems to broadly lump all ICT related activity into the same concept as digital literacy, a point that has been challenged in its assumption that various levels of skills, such as word processing, lend themselves naturally to other activities, such as social media communication. There are many different forms of digital literacy, and by extension digital citizenship, which means that online behaviours and student identities are often most influenced by social and technical context alongside, indeed, cultural forces that promote such behaviours. As such, students may be driven to 'cyber-cheat', or engage in online deviance with respect to academic intellectual property, because of collective pressures, suggesting both collusion and peer-pressure with respect to academic integrity may drive the decision to violate academics copyright, by stealing and then disseminating eBooks of academic textbooks

(Parks et al., 2018). One factor that may shape Chinese HE students decision to engage in digital piracy is emotional intelligence, coupled with intense cultural pressures. These include family obligation, deference to teachers and a high degree of competitive pressure to succeed and excel against peers (Waters and Day, 2022a; 2022b).

Indeed, as Hill (2007) establishes, there may be unique sociological features that contribute to the prevalence of digital piracy within China. These are suggested, within the article, to include affordability issues, where students cannot afford legitimate products due to high prices, lack of availability of legitimate products in certain markets, such as high-status goods, social acceptance of piracy as common cultural practice, which is facilitated by vague enforcement and weak intellectual property protection laws that prevent effective reductions in the practice. Digital piracy is widespread in China due to a combination, then, of cultural, economic, and enforcement factors. Culturally, there has been a long tradition of imitation and copying in China, rooted in Confucian values that revered the transmission of knowledge through copying existing works rather than viewing it as plagiarism or theft. Put another way, repurposing and borrowing of ideas is seen as a societal good, especially if it can make something more accessible to the community (Waters and Day, 2022a; 2022b). As Schwabach (2008) notes, it is not simply driven by greed, nor just convenience, rather deeply philosophical belief ingrained in cultural norms. These norms likewise reflect in the ambiguous nature of legal process within China. As Yu (2007) argues, legal rules within China are often ideologically compromising so broadly and vaguely termed, hence formulated on an ad hoc basis, likely to fall behind digital shifts and transformation, given the rapid social and economic changes in this area. This provides an apt breeding ground for digital piracy, given that the Internet is even more vaguely constructed, firewalled, and isolated in China, meaning habitual bypassing of local laws related to VPNs and masking of online activity, is commonplace.

As such, enforcement of intellectual property rights in China has long been a significant challenge, with inconsistent and often ineffective implementation of laws and regulations; political shifts have also hindered crackdowns on piracy, as some bodies may be reluctant to shut down businesses generating profits and employment, especially if they are connected to authority figures (Swike et al., 2008; Hill, 2007). Moreover, the sheer scale of the piracy problem in China, exacerbated by the rise of online piracy, makes it difficult to tackle, given the large population body and regionally distributed provinces with differing administrative bodies. As Priest (2006) suggests, at least in so far as music and film piracy, China is home to one of the largest piracy problems in human history, which meant that the country was dancing delicately on the precipice of an Internet piracy epidemic, even before broadband and fibre optic download speeds came into practice and made it much faster to steal. Hence, since this, the practice has become more commonplace, despite efforts to strengthen intellectual property protection and enforcement therein. Subsequently, overcoming the cultural acceptance, economic disparities, and consistent enforcement across the country remain major challenges even nearly twenty years after this research was conducted.

These factors have made digital piracy in China commonplace and are highly relevant to understanding the prevalence of academic piracy of textbooks in Chinas universities. Culturally, the long-standing Confucian tradition of imitation and copying, as a means of transmitting knowledge, has normalised the practice of sharing and reproducing copyrighted materials, including textbooks, especially given students often arrive at universities, include those internationally situated, with differing ideas of

norms and practices around education and pedagogical practice. Their deeply ingrained and politically maintained belief system includes repurposing existing works and ideas of others as a form of societal good, especially if it increases accessibility, strengthens Chinese society, or helps the majority. If so, it is likely seen as ethically justified, rather than as plagiarism or theft. Economically, the high costs of legitimate textbooks and their limited availability in certain regions in China, especially when written in languages beyond mandarin, or censored by the government, have driven many students to resort to pirated copies as a more affordable or simply accessible alternative. With economic disparities and varying levels of access, piracy logically unfolds as an appealing option for those unable to afford or obtain official textbooks.

Furthermore, the inconsistent enforcement of intellectual property laws and weak legal protections discussed have created an environment conducive to academic piracy. Local corruption, and the sheer scale of the piracy problem across China's vast geography have hindered effective crackdowns on the unauthorized distribution of copyrighted materials, including textbooks. Moreover, many websites distributing such textbooks are located beyond China, and the main form of preventing the practice is simply ISP blocking of banned websites. This can be easily circumvented by a VPN, which is a commonly utilised practice amongst Asian students facing authoritarian governments (Day and Skulsuthavong, 2022; 2021). Just as these cultural, economic, and enforcement factors have contributed to the widespread digital piracy issue in China, they have also facilitated the cultural norm and persistence of academic piracy of textbooks in Chinese universities. Despite efforts to strengthen intellectual property rights, overcoming the deeply rooted cultural acceptance, addressing economic barriers, and ensuring consistent enforcement across the country remain significant challenges in curbing this practice within academic institutions. Therefore, and with this in mind, it is an interesting concept, then, to explore how much these values and norms have been carried over to more international learning environments within China. Moreover, to explore critically the extent of knowledge and understanding that students have with respect to academic piracy, as well as how it intersects with their own integrity, decision-making and belief systems regarding behaviour within universities.

Materials and Methods

Consequently, the study approached this topic through investigating the views of students currently engaged in study within a joint-venture institution, set up between a British and Chinese university, which is located within mainland China. Data was collected on the ground, in person via a qualitative method to collect insight from students, driven by an online survey and digital focus group where students could post responses to specific discussion themes, share ideas, and respond to one another. To begin, a teaching session was delivered in person on the topic of digital piracy in the context of higher education, followed by 3 seminars. A total of 103 students attended the seminars, and 91 of them returned the survey, representing an approximate response rate of 88%. Additionally, 87 students (approximately 84%) provided comments by posting them online in the digital forum focus group, which is used as the basis of data discussed within this article. Accordingly, the survey responses showed that 91% of the students identified as female, and 70% were between the ages of 22 and 25 years old. All participants (100%) identified as Chinese in nationality, which was surprising given the study was situated in an international university in China, where English was the

medium of spoken instruction. The analysis of the data was grounded in postmodern thinking and grounded theory. This article presents a snapshot, then, of specific themes and insight gained from students in an online focus group, where respondents posted comments and engaged in discussions, responding to each other.

Grounded theory was deployed as a lens to analyse the data, which stresses flexible researcher interpretation rather than preformed conclusions, hypotheses, or structured objectives in data analysis. In line with this approach, the study employed narrative commonality and thematic comparison, a concept well-defined within the grounded theory perspective, to draw conceptual perspectives and shape responses to the research question articulated earlier. This served as a frame for the analysis, sorting and codification of the collected data. The research study adhered to ethical principles and guidelines for conducting research involving human participants, despite the context of the data being collected online. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the university, and participation was generated via convenience sampling and voluntary opt-in. Participants were informed of their rights to opt-out at any time without consequence prior to the end of the data collection period. All responses and data collected was kept confidential and anonymous, reported as such and the forum used to collect the data was deleted after the collection window to prevent personally identifiable information from being collected or reported by the university that hosted the study. Those in the study had read relevant consent and study information ahead of time.

Results and Discussion

With respect to whether Chinese university students demonstrated awareness of intellectual property rights, and their impact on decisions to pirate content for learning, the students interviewed showed a strong capacity for understanding the moral, ethical, and professional dimensions of stealing eBooks from grey market online social media platforms or via sharing with course peers. In the case of Student A, it was clear that they were acutely aware that using illegal copies of academic textbooks was: "*...breaking copyright law, and I told myself, it deserved to be shut down. However, I still think books are too expensive and not everyone could afford them*". Whilst cost and other driving factors influenced the decision for students to steal books online and share them, the practice was equally questioned by Student B as to whose responsibility it was to provide the books for learning purposes, and they debated if:

"*...there is a duty or obligation to provide knowledge to everyone, everywhere. While access to knowledge can certainly be beneficial, it is not clear who bears the responsibility for providing it. Furthermore, there may be practical barriers such as limited resources, language barriers, or cultural differences that impede the dissemination of knowledge*".

Consequently, the student raised interesting critical enquiry exploring whether students, as learning agents, have any responsibility to pay for books, in debating whether:

"*...individuals have an inherent right to access knowledge. However, this assumes that knowledge is a public good rather than a commodity that can be owned and*

monetized. In reality, knowledge is often subject to intellectual property laws, which allow for individuals and organizations to retain exclusive rights over their intellectual creations".

Student C remarked a detailed rationale, which explored the position relating cost to digital piracy. However they asserted a detailed rationale supporting that publication had implications for both modes of study, but also the academic scholars reputation, recognising that it was damaged by the theft of academic textbooks:

"*Every scholar who publishes deserves the academic respect that he deserves. If the author does not need to get royalties for publishing articles or books, then he can set the work to be open source online. Once the author wants to gain wealth through knowledge, then we should respect the author's idea. I don't buy the idea that knowledge should be freely available to anyone, anywhere, because those who disseminate knowledge, whether academics or publishers, need financial resources. Scholars also invest a lot of time and money in learning knowledge before they become scholars, and if it is made available to anyone, anywhere for free, it will make academics who pay to learn passive. But as a student, I always think that the original textbooks in English are very expensive and I cannot afford them. This is mainly due to printing costs and shipping costs. But it's a solvable problem. For example, set up a local printing factory to save transportation costs or provide an online electronic version at a lower price. Physical books, especially English physical books, are difficult to attract my interest in reading. I like reading e-books, and it is convenient and fast for me*".

There appeared to be, across the sample studied, a detailed degree of understanding with respect to the rights and responsibilities of scholars, with many students showing an acute understanding of how they had to follow rules and responsibilities set down by their academic context, as well as their community. Given this study was undertaken in mainland China, it was not a surprise when Student B remarked another reason for protecting academic copyright, alongside integrity, as: "*...certain types of knowledge, such as classified or sensitive information, may be restricted for legitimate reasons such as national security or privacy concerns*". As noted, Chinese students face stronger political influence in their learning experiences, which meant that for this student breaking government rules was more of a concern than convenience of stealing eBooks. It seemed, across many of those who responded, Chinese students closely reflected upon the legal impact of any such digital piracy, often contextually linking to an atmosphere of law-abiding tendency conveyed by the authoritarian nature of their residency. For example, Student D stated that they believed: "*...copyright is very important for scholars and creators. Only by protecting their copyright from abuse and misuse can they have the motivation to continue to create and research. And I think that the unauthorized posting of other people's papers or books is tantamount to theft*". Students in the sample demonstrated, then, showed a high degree of awareness that stealing books from the Internet and distributing them to peers had an impact on scholars income and creative independence. Indeed, as Student E noted, they were aware that stealing eBooks online was very beneficial: "*...for students who can't afford genuine academic books and reduces their financial burden...*" yet they positioned the responsibility for providing access to learning material on the students university, rather than their

individual purchasing power, noting that they were aware this action: "*...violates the author's copyright. A good solution is for the library of the school where the students are located to buy these academic books so that students can use them for free. After all, students have paid tuition fees*".

The university students interviewed across the sample, then, demonstrated a strong understanding of the ethical implications of pirating academic eBooks and textbooks to support their study. Hence, whilst cost and other negative barriers faced as students was shown to be a major factor driving piracy decisions, students critically explored whose responsibility it was to provide affordable access to learning materials-individual students, authors/publishers, universities, or society at large. Students seemed aware that piracy violated intellectual property rights and could see and articulate how this damaged scholars income. There was awareness that this undermines incentives for continued research and creation. However, they grappled with the moral dilemma of balancing access and affordability of educational resources. Given the authoritarian context Chinese HE operates within, some students expressed concerns about following government restrictions on certain types of knowledge beyond just copyright laws. Hence, they needed to either comply with restrictions on literature, or use digital piracy websites to enable them to access course material that was prohibited this may be a unique situation to the sample, who studied in a joint-venture university equally situated in UK pedagogical traditions such as academic freedom, which shaped course design.

Subsequently, the students showed high awareness that eBook piracy of academic textbooks hurt content creators, as they debated solutions to make materials more accessible. The problem, it seemed, was lack of alternative options. Hence, several students proposed their own alternative ways to make learning more accessible and reduce reliance on digital piracy. Student F, for example, suggested that: "*The electronic version of the book can charge a moderate fee, and those who need the paper version continue to buy the paper version. This will not break the copyright and also meet the different needs of people*". Indeed, many in the sample felt that those stealing eBooks online was breaking copyright and infringing on the intellectual rights of others. Student G, for example, stated: "*Similar behavior is an infringement and disrespect for intellectual property rights*". The student also identified, across students, that particular social media engagement mechanisms for stealing of books, for example sharing and distributing through personal networks, meant that social media websites dedicated to stealing led people astray, into unethical practices that impacted academic integrity, because any: "*...platform for students and professionals to download books, its infringement of copyright itself has also played a bad exemplary role*". As a result, students within the sample demonstrated an ethical awareness of stealing academic textbooks and connected this to academic integrity and behaviour. Not all students reached the same ethical conclusion, however. For Student H, they remarked I have a simple sense of justice: "*if the creators of some fields have made a decent enough living, the distribution of benefits should be tilted in favour of the public*". It was clear, however, that for some students violating copyright and academic intellectual rights was simply a necessity. As Student I pointed out: "*I have limited time to access school library to prepare the degree study. Hence online resources are significant for me to complete the degree requirement. Limited by the copyright, the college online library could not offer sufficient resource for me*".

The students expressed varying perspectives on digital piracy and academic integrity, suggesting an ethical spectrum existed. While some students recognised it as copyright

infringement and disrespect for intellectual property rights, others justified it as a necessity due to limited access or a means to weigh public benefit over such creators rights. Some students demonstrated, however, a clear understanding of these issues of theft, while others prioritised personal convenience or perceived fairness over legal and ethical considerations, but still recognised these dimensions, with less weight. The contrasting viewpoints highlighted, then, the need for effective educational efforts within universities to build upon positive ethical behaviour seen across some students and respect for intellectual property in academic settings. Student I summarised the overall position of the sample quite effectively, noting:

"While the idea of freely available knowledge may seem desirable, there are concerns and considerations to keep in mind. One significant concern is the potential financial impact on the creators of knowledge resources, such as authors, publishers, and institutions. Without proper compensation, these stakeholders may not have the necessary resources to continue producing quality materials. Additionally, unrestricted access to knowledge can lead to issues with the accuracy and reliability of information, as there may be no vetting process for the materials made available. Furthermore, there are ethical and legal considerations, such as copyright infringement, which may arise if knowledge is shared without permission. Therefore, while the principle of free access to knowledge is admirable, there are complex factors to consider in practice".

Moreover, Student J noted a relationship between their own academic work and studies, alongside their potential, as academics, to develop into authors themselves one day, suggesting that this cycle needed to be respected by recognising intellectual copyright and not stealing online copies of textbooks:

"Intellectual copyright should be respected. Respecting intellectual property rights is protecting the author as well as ourselves. In the future, if we become authors ourselves, we will not want our works to be used as pirated copies either. Poverty is no excuse for using pirated copies. In class, my teacher introduced us to ResearchGate, a website where you don't have to pay for the paper, but have to request access from the author. Pirated publications are always just a lazy shortcut, not a reason to condone free pirated publications".

While the idea of freely available knowledge may seem desirable, and easily understood as to why students might steal textbooks from online platforms, the sample demonstrated considerable conflict over the action, suggesting that there are significant concerns and considerations to keep in mind when planning for resources within universities. One major concern felt across the students interviewed was that there was potential financial impact on creators of knowledge resources, such as authors, publishers, and institutions, who publish the work, which in turn may mean that they may lack the necessary resources to continue producing quality materials, without proper compensation. Additionally, unrestricted access to knowledge was recognised by several in the sample, but it was felt this could lead to issues with the accuracy and reliability of information, as there may be no vetting process for the materials made available, and the degree of digital literacy and discernment students might have been variable. Furthermore, it seemed that students knew there are ethical and legal

considerations, such as copyright infringement, which may arise if knowledge is shared without permission. The insight from the sample demonstrates an understanding of the importance of respecting intellectual property rights, as potential creators themselves. Hence, students showed understanding of a need to recognise using pirated copies of academic works is unethical and could potentially harm the authors themselves if they become creators of such materials in the future a possibility, given that they were engaged in postgraduate study. This was summarised aptly by Student J, who noted that when: "...*content is pirated (it) does not support the original author's labor achievements. Because writing an article once takes a lot of time and effort and requires multiple modifications before it can be published, the direct use of the library has not been approved by the author, and even many authors have violated copyright without their knowledge*". Yet, Student K disagreed, asserting: "*Many books are priced too high, or even have no legitimate copies to buy, which cannot meet the needs of readers. Most of the money people pay for legitimate books does not go to the author or translator, but to some publisher who owns the copyright. The phenomenon is particularly common in academic publishing in Europe and the US, where it has helped fuel the popularity of pirated copies of scanned e-books*".

Both, then, presented contrasting perspectives on the issue of pirating academic materials. Student J argued against piracy, stressing the need to respect authors labour and intellectual property rights. They pointed out, so showed understanding, that an academic writing an article, or, book required significant time, effort, and revisions before publication, so using pirated copies without the their consent violates copyright, as well as undermined this intellectual effort. Perhaps, as a student themselves, they saw similarities in the working pattern and lifestyle as the author whose work was stolen. On the other hand, Student K justified piracy within the context of higher education, claiming that many academic books are overpriced or unavailable legitimately, especially for those living in a country with strict censorship, hence the economics of academic publishers failed to meet needs and target means. They asserted that publishers, then, not authors or translators, were the ones who profited most from book sales, particularly in academic publishing, furthering the popularity of pirated e-books and justifying the violation of intellectual rights. An underpinning logic, therefore, was that publishers were already taking advantage of authors and content creators; hence, any act of academic copyright violation was more damaging to the publisher than the author. As Student L asserted: "*I believe that knowledge equity should be reflected in the right of everyone to acquire knowledge, not in the sharing of knowledge*". Meanwhile, Student M reinforced this, arguing that:

"*Copyright law should be respected as a law protecting the intellectual property rights of authors. In many cases, people may fail to fully follow copyright laws (for economic and other reasons), but many software companies cannot fail to follow the law. Because companies tend to have a huge social impact, which is negative, and the impact of the company will encourage more people to disrespect the law, but also will make people more negative about the concept of intellectual property*".

Indeed, Student N argued a similar point, suggesting: "*Intellectual property rights should be protected in any country. Knowledge is invaluable, but those who strive for it need to be paid to live or be motivated to continue their research. Of course, the authors hope that their research can benefit more people, but in reality, they also need more*

money to invest in research". Students, then, seemed aware that stealing academic content online had a detrimental impact on research. Whilst they seemed to believe that the financial impact may be more significant for publishers than authors, they knew that violating academic intellectual rights ultimately harmed the entire ecosystem of knowledge creation and dissemination within higher education. Student L, for example, argued that knowledge equity should be about ensuring everyone has the right to acquire knowledge, not about freely sharing copyrighted materials, suggesting that this ecosystem needed rethinking as the model didn't quite work, or was unduly capitalist and as such leant itself to exploitation whether of students, creators or learning itself. Student M built on this view, arguing that copyright laws protecting intellectual property rights should be respected, as disregard for these laws can have a negative societal impact and encourage more people to disrespect intellectual property, leading to societal damage. Student N believed that intellectual property rights should be protected globally, as researchers need to be compensated for their efforts and motivated to continue their work. They acknowledged that while authors hope their research benefits many, they also require funding to invest in further research. Piracy undermines this funding model, or at least negatively impacts the wealth of an academic, which is usually far less in terms of renumeration than if they worked in a private industry sector, hence demotivating effort and potentially hindering the advancement of knowledge and scientific progress. Yet, underpinning several reflections was the culturally driven, communal sense view of borrowing and repurposing for the greater good, such as Student O who remarked: "*The future of books, the right to read itself, should and will be offered to all humanity for free; it is the right to own that is sold commercially. This is the trend and not just the so-called spirit of the Internet*".

Conclusion

The findings from the study offered valuable insights into the issue of digital piracy in China, particularly in relation to academic materials and textbooks. Echoing perspectives outlined in the literature review, the study sample acknowledged the prevalence of piracy in Chinese , including HE academic piracy of textbooks and other educational materials in universities, as a commonplace activity. Echoing the student perspectives, the literature reviewed established to a long-standing cultural tradition of imitation and copying in China, rooted in Confucian values that viewed the transmission of knowledge. So, copying as a societal good rather than plagiarism or theft. This cultural acceptance seemed less prevalent in the thinking of the students, though it was present frequently. Many, however, were able to identify why sharing and reproducing copyrighted materials, including textbooks, damaged intellectual rights and research overall. Economic factors, however, such as convenience were felt across the responses of the sample. Consistent with Student K's argument, the literature considered also stressed high prices of legitimate textbooks and their limited availability in certain regions in China as drivers of piracy. Economic disparities and varying levels of access made digital piracy an appealing option for those unable to afford or obtain official textbooks, as well. Few, if any, students remarked on any perceived potential consequences for breaking the law in this area, suggesting that nobody within the sample felt that law and policy were effective deterrents of academic digital piracy.

However, unlike the literature considered, the implications of piracy in academia were felt with more nuance across most of the students, echoing Student N's concern

about the negative impact on research funding and the advancement of knowledge. Students, then, seemed to be acutely aware of the potential losses for domestic Chinese universities and knowledge industries. They spoke frequently about the impact for innovation and creativity, when academic creators are not adequately compensated because their works are stolen. Furthermore, unlike in the literature considered, which often situated the historical and legal context of piracy in China, tracing its roots to the absence of intellectual property laws and the Chinas efforts to modernise its copyright framework, the students seemed to not place any explicit reference on legal reprisal thinking. Indeed, several statements pointed to an underpinning socialist mindset when it came to knowledge as a tool for everyone to use freely. This might suggest one reason potential policy options are so vague, and why cracking down on piracy, maintaining the current course, or adopting innovative compensation systems have been slow to evolve within China. Simply, cultural practices and social norms view it as acceptable ethical practice, if it benefits the community. Overall, while the student perspectives capture some key factors contributing to academic piracy in Chinese universities, there is a clear need to develop an educational framework to ensure students can be taught to recognise the importance of academic copyright. Steps forward, then, for university policy makers include a variety of aspects, which based upon the research outlined in this article can be summarised as nine essential steps forward for thinking about academic digital piracy in universities, which begins by: (1) Implementing educational campaigns and awareness programs within universities to address the cultural acceptance of piracy and challenge the notion that copying and sharing copyrighted materials is a societal good; (2) Exploring affordable pricing models and flexible payment options for textbooks and educational materials to address the economic barriers that drive students towards pirated copies; (3) Improve the availability and accessibility of legitimate textbooks and educational resources, particularly in regions where access is limited; (4) Strengthen the enforcement of intellectual property laws and legal protections within academic institutions, ensuring consistent implementation and consequences for violations; (5) Foster greater collaboration between universities, publishers, and content creators to develop innovative compensation systems that balance the needs of students, authors, and the advancement of knowledge; (6) Encourage open dialogue and discussions within the academic community to understand the underlying motivations and perspectives surrounding piracy, and to collectively develop solutions that address the root causes; (7) Promote the importance of respecting intellectual property rights and the potential negative impacts of piracy on research funding, innovation, and the overall advancement of knowledge; (8) Adopt greater technological measures, such as digital rights management (DRM) systems, to prevent unauthorised distribution and access to copyrighted materials, while ensuring reasonable access for legitimate educational purposes; and (9) Explore alternative models of knowledge dissemination and open educational resources that align with the cultural values of accessibility and knowledge sharing, while respecting intellectual property rights.

As shown in the research affirmed within the article, the allure of digital piracy in Chinese HE stems from a complex interplay of cultural, economic, and enforcement factors. These cannot easily be assumed to be just about the cost and convenience of accessing pirated materials, such as textbooks and academic resources. Indeed, students were acutely aware of the ethical paradoxes and challenges embedded in stealing the work of others, often demonstrating this awareness alongside any strong appeal for

justified agency or right to steal. However, the research in this article also demonstrates that the practice of digital piracy in Chinese universities is still prevalent, with diverse views on the subject across a student body. As such, digital piracy is seen, by many, as posing significant risks to the integrity of academic copyright and the broader ecosystem of knowledge creation and dissemination. However, these practices are, whether explicitly or implicitly, seen as also justified, often through rationalisations that are deeply rooted in Chinese cultural traditions that view imitation and sharing as a means of transmitting knowledge, or bettering China itself. This underpins at least part of the practice of reproducing and sharing illegally copyrighted materials, further exacerbating the issue. Overcoming the challenges posed by digital piracy in Chinese academia will require a multifaceted approach in the future, especially as AI tools and technologies make cheating even easier and piracy more instant, given the rapid responsiveness of such technologies in supporting academic research. Therefore, a way forward is needed. One that addresses the underlying cultural acceptance, economic barriers, and enforcement gaps around digital piracy in Chinese universities. By fostering such awareness, implementing affordable pricing models, strengthening legal protections, and exploring innovative solutions that balance accessibility and respect for intellectual property rights, Chinese universities can pave the way towards a more sustainable and ethical academic environment. So, one that nurtures creativity, innovation, and the advancement of knowledge, alongside academic integrity over convenience.

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Conflict of interest

The author confirms that there is no conflict of interest involved with any parties in this research study.

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