



*PL*agiarism

A Chinese Scam

Fred Schaper from the Technical University of Aachen, Germany, gives a talk at a Keystone Meeting. A couple of months later he discovers the figures he presented in a fresh paper. The author is a Chinese who also attended the meeting.

On 6th August 2008 Fred Schaper, biochemist and Associate Professor at the Technical University of Aachen, received several new articles in his specialist field via *PubCrawler*. Whilst looking through them a couple of days later, the preview of one paper, which had been accepted by the *Journal Cellular Signalling* (Vol. 6694), particularly caught his eye. It dealt with Interleukin 6-induced gene expression.

No doubts left

“Those are my illustrations!” exclaimed the astonished Schaper. “They are the exact same slides I presented at the Keystone Meeting in January 2007. Who has written this?”

The listed authors were Jinbo Yang, Qin Wang, Yuping Du, Ximming Chen und Lizhe An; the correspondence address was Lanzhou University. Up until last year, Jinbo Yang, corresponding author, had been working as a postdoc in George Stark’s lab at the Lerner Institute, Cleveland, USA. He had since returned to his homeland. Schaper had never heard of him.

Over the ensuing days, Schaper was preoccupied with comparing his Keystone slides to the figures in the *Cellular Signalling* paper produced by the Chinese. The results he presented to his postgraduates and colleagues were met with utter disbelief.

All seven figures in the Yang *et al* paper, excepting numbers 2c, 3b, 4b, 4c and 5, originated from Schaper’s Keystone presentation. In general, it dealt with Western blots and their evaluations; however, even the concluding schematic drawing (Fig. 7) was by and large copied 1:1 by the Chinese. Yang *et al* might well have edited Schaper’s illustrations and highlighted them differently but the plagiarism was recognisable

beyond a doubt due to the blot’s identical background structure. Furthermore, Yang *et al* didn’t just plagiarise but also manipulated the illustrations: the legends had evidently been changed (for example, “Electrophoretic Mobility Shift Assay” instead of “Western Blot”, “siRNA” instead of “knock-out MEFs”).

Part of the data had already been published in 2004 by Schaper’s Chinese postgraduate, Xiang-Ping Yang, in the *Journal of Biological Chemistry* (vol. 279: 45279-89) and in his thesis; another part was published in 2007 by Ute Albrecht in *Cellular Signalling* (vol. 19: 1866-78). Schaper had recently submitted the remainder, including

Schaper created a table, matching the stolen figures to their possible sources: Keystone presentation, Xian-Ping’s *Journal of Biological Chemistry* paper and thesis, Albrecht’s *Cellular Signalling* paper. Schaper’s Keystone presentation turned out to be the most probable source. Not only because his slide show contained all the copied figures but also because the paper by Yang *et al* contained exactly the same title as one of Schaper’s slides: “SOCS3 mediates IL-1 β -dependent inhibition of IL-6 induced gene expression”. Even the colour coding on the bar chart was identical.

But how did Jinbo Yang acquire Schaper’s presentation material? Schaper leafed through the meeting’s attendance list. Jinbo Yang was, indeed, one of the participants and had also given a presentation. How did he manage to get hold of the other presenter’s data?

Schaper tried to recall, “The presentation PCs weren’t available to everyone. The technicians sat right next to the lectern. But was that always the case? Hmm, I don’t know...”

Fred Schaper took immediate action, nevertheless. On 8th August he informed the editors of *Cellular Signalling*, an Elsevier Journal of his suspicions. He didn’t mince his words and spoke of “fraud”. Schaper demanded that the paper, published temporarily on the Net as “E-Pub”, be removed and that the fraud be exposed. Furthermore, he urged the editors to inform the Rector of Lanzhou University.

Enters the editor

The editors of *Cellular Signalling* took the problem in hand and put the paper on hold, meaning that the E-Pub version was not processed for printing. Furthermore, they handed the matter over to Elsevier.



fresh results, to *PLoS Biology* for publication.

“How did the Chinese get hold of my data?” puzzled Schaper. “Well, the thesis by Xiang-Ping is available on the Internet but that only contains part of the stolen figures and they are in a different style. They can’t have originated from a photo on a poster, either; the quality of the illustrations is too good”.

The publisher, in turn, wrote to Jinbo Yang and requested an explanation.

This approach was too slow for Schaper. On 13th August he informed the organisers of the Keystone Meetings. They reacted immediately and confirmed Schaper's findings. A few days later, their subsequent enquiry enabled them to verify that Jinbo Yang had acted as a conference assistant at the January 2007 Keystone Meeting. The Keystone committee suspected that Yang had abused this position to download Schaper's data from the audiovisual computer. Yang would be henceforth excluded from all Keystone congresses.

On 14th August, Schaper wrote to Jinbo Yang and notified him that not only had he informed the editors of *Cellular Signalling* and the Keystone organisers of the plagiarism but that he had also handed the matter over to the Aachen University law department. Schaper's closing sentence was: "If you have any sort of justification for publishing the above mentioned manuscript in

its present version we request you to disclose it immediately. Otherwise, we expect a retraction of the manuscript as well as a formal statement published on the home page of Cell Signalling declaring that it was retracted because figures were illegally copied from our laboratory."

Jinbo Yang responded the very next day (15th August). In a letter to the co-editor of *Cellular Signalling* he disputed the plagiarism. He maintained he had simply repeated Schaper's experiments, obtained the same results and presented them in a similar style. He regretted that he had omitted to mention this in the paper but would be willing to rectify this.

Back-peddalling

In another long letter to Schaper, Yang maintained the same position. He claimed to have already begun work on Interleukin in 2003. He had prepared a manuscript on Interleukin twice before and each time someone else had beaten him to publication. He had listened to Schaper's presentation at the Keystone Meeting, which motivated him to perform new experiments and he had added the new data to his old manuscript. Jinbo Yang was prepared to retract or modify the figures in question, which he still proclaimed to be his own. However, he was not willing to withdraw the entire manuscript because he had definitely not copied any data but had only gained similar results.

Schaper was not satisfied with this response. He immediately forwarded a copy of his table, in which he had matched the figures copied and manipulated by Yang *et al* with their respective sources, as well as his slides, to Jinbo Yang and Yang's mentor, George Stark. The latter then pursued the matter further.

Jinbo Yang's response came on 26th August. He admitted that his group had copied several of Schaper's results but not as many as Schaper claimed. Two of Jinbo Yang's students had come across Schaper's conference slides via Google and specific online bio-forums. They claimed to have copied seminar presentations from many other speakers, too. Jinbo Yang insisted that he had not stolen the slides. Furthermore, he had never seen the slides sent to him by Schaper.

Jinbo Yang even maintained to George Stark that he had not attended Schaper's presentation (although how that reconciles with Yang's assurance of 15th August and in the same letter that he *had* heard Schaper's presentation, will remain his well-kept se-

cret). At any rate, two of his students had arranged some of the figures inaccurately, for which he, as corresponding author, naturally assumed entire responsibility. Depending on how Schaper felt, he could either retract the paper or invite Schaper to appear as co-author.

The offer to be included as co-author on the fraudulent paper was like a red rag to a bull for Schaper. He blew his top!

On 27th August Schaper wrote to the editors of *Cellular Signalling* and Jinbo Yang, remonstrating that Yang's response was wholly unacceptable. The data in their copied version could only have originated from his, Schaper's, Keystone Powerpoint document and had never been available online. The students that Yang accused had not participated in the Keystone conference. Neither do they appear on the authors' list in the Yang *et al* paper. Furthermore, Schaper was concerned that Jinbo Yang could use the unpublished data in the Keystone document for future "personal" publications. Finally, Yang's suggestion of including him as co-author on the fraudulent paper was a downright disgrace.

The final confession

At this point Yang caved in. In his reply which reached Schaper the very next day, he admitted that all the figures in question had indeed been pirated. However, *he* had not stolen the Powerpoint document. His student now claims to have obtained the slides from another meeting attendee, and it was this person who had downloaded them from the computer at the meeting. The student refused to reveal said person's name, however, he and his fellow students had downloaded over a hundred presentations from different meetings for study purposes. Jinbo Yang would assume sole responsibility for the affair and asked Schaper not to damage Lanzhou University's reputation. He had destroyed all data and was resolved never to work in this field ever again.

Jinbo Yang closed his letter with: "I will no longer respond to any future accusations. I will agree with any additional accusations you make, because I have learned that all of the accusations made up to now are based on very solid evidence. You have taught me a great lesson, which will serve me well in my future research career."

I am so sorry to have taken so much of your time to handle this issue. I hope that this email will let you feel a little bit better."

The paper has since been retracted.

HUBERT REHM

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