

49. The Cheat

Hou Wang's parents were so proud of him when he was born. He showed great intelligence immediately he was delivered. His eyes wide open, looking all around the room, and even cooing instead of crying. His gaze settled first on his father when he received him into his loving arms, then to his mother laying exhausted on the bed, head pushed back into the pillow. But there was no doubt about it. His eyes followed his mom or dad whoever was closer to his little body. He clearly absorbed everything around him. His dad loved to pick him up, raise him quickly above his head, and Hou Wang would scream with delight as his dad let go and caught him as gravity brought him down. Such a happy family!

They were certain that they had given birth to a genius. His mom double checked to make sure that his name was down for the very best English multi-lingual school in Beijing. It was not long before he was talking. His mom spoke to him in Chinese, his dad in English, not to mention some French and a little Spanish. They could hardly wait for him to start school.

There was, however, one troubling coincidence. The day Hou Wang was born was the day of the Tiananmen Square massacre. Of course, it was just a coincidence. But his mom was very concerned. Coincidences occurred for a reason, she insisted. But Dad told her not to be silly. They were both well educated, and serious devotees of Confucius so were not inclined to take much notice of the signs and symbols of everyday life. But they occasionally dropped by a Buddhist temple to say a little prayer and leave a frangipani petal just to let the great spirit know that they acknowledged a life beyond their own.

It so happened that on that infamous day, Dad, or about-to-be-Dad, sprinted across Tiananmen Square on his way to the hospital. He had received word that the baby would be born any time soon, and, remarkably, had received permission from his boss at the local post office to attend the birth. It was early in the morning and the demonstrators had not yet appeared at the Square. He noticed camera crews getting into place, arranging their cameras, but thought nothing much of it. There were often

gatherings at the square. It was only much later when he arrived home with his wife and new baby that they heard from neighbors what had happened. None of it was, of course, shown on the TV. But there were other sources of information pouring in from the west via faxes, radio and so on. The Chinese Government had not caught up with the new communication technologies and was still working on controlling what the western media could have access to in Chinese territory..

But what the Chinese government did have well developed was a system of spies and some of their own technology, especially cameras installed in many places, particularly at Tiananmen Square, not to mention in the hospital where they monitored the one child policy.

The brief moment of joy that Hou Wang's mom and dad had when their one baby, and a boy at that, was born was soon shattered by an arrest of Dad and threats against Mom that the authorities would take away their one child, as it was clear to them that they were not responsible parents if the father was going to participate in an insurrection. In fact, a petty official pointed out to the father that the punishment for his appearance at Tiananmen square could have been death.

These were the origins of Hou Wang's life. How his parents eventually managed to escape to Brazil when Hou Wang was ten years old, where the family managed to scrape by running a tiny Chinese restaurant, the Confucian Grill, in Rio de Janeiro, as one of many Chinese refugees. One that finally led, when Hou Wang was sixteen years old, just graduated from high school, to the trek up through Mexico and the walk across the Rio Grande into the USA to enter God's promised land. These stories Hou Wang had not told anyone at the School of Criminal Justice where he was accepted as a graduate student in 2005. His English by that time had developed greatly in its fluency, though his mother tongues remained Chinese and close seconds, Portuguese and Spanish. He zoomed through the School of Criminal Justice graduate program, and in fact I attended his dissertation defense, a brilliant performance and a dissertation written beautifully, the topic being a study of juvenile delinquency in New York City's chinatown. It also happened that it was a dissertation that Colmes had helped supervise, though was not its chair. That position, was, believe it or not, occupied by the Provost, most unusual,

since Provosts were supposed to be too busy with academic affairs to have the time to serve on dissertation committees. But it was her way, as Colmes pointed out to me later, of making herself look scholarly and very much one of the faculty, an academic first, and an administrator second. Hou Wang went on to pursue a career at John Jay college where he received early tenure in 2012. It was just after he received tenure that Colmes received the call.

I quickly stopped trying to draft my dissertation proposal and responded to Colmes's call and bang on the wall. No sooner had I taken up my place on the wicker chair than Colmes plunged into one of his favorite topics.

"Cheating," insisted Colmes, "is breaking a rule in order to gain unfair advantage."

We have had many a debate about this perennial problem that is endemic to academia, if not life in general, and Colmes went on as though this were the continuation of one of our debates. My retort has always been, yes, but rules are made to be broken, that without there being any rules, there would be no such thing as cheating. And therefore no villain to vilify. Colmes always made fun of my position, simply chuckling and saying what he thought was obvious, that rules are necessary to maintain order. What would happen if everyone did what they pleased, regardless of the rules? There would be chaos.

"Rules," pronounced Colmes in his Victorian manner, "maketh the man."

"Indeed, and you are their direct product," I would say with a grin.

"And I am proud of it," Colmes would say in his most haughty manner. He would then go on to use the example of the game of cricket, a game above all games in his opinion, that could not be played without the detailed rules of the game put in place at its foundation, and the willingness of players to abide by those rules.

And again I would point out that there are many games, if not all, in which players will try to use the rules to their advantage, a typical technique being to trick an opponent into breaking a rule, such as in basketball, when one commonly tries to "draw a foul" from the opponent. (You will immediately see

that this is yet another variation of “entrapment” as are described in other cases.)

“Ah yes, there you have me, Hobson, there you have me,” Colmes would retort, sitting back in his chair, tapping his fingers together. “But this incontrovertible fact is a necessary evil, for without it there would be no game to play.”

“True, so true,” I would respond, “though maybe life would be better without competitive sport, which is basically what you are defending.”

“The game of life, Hobson! Mutual aid is impossible, my boy! If only humans were made differently! You are an anarchist at heart,” Colmes would say, signaling the end of our debate. For he had resorted to the trick of attacking the person rather than the issue. The first step to abuse.

But he always allowed himself the last word. There were, after all, no written rules for our discourse. Colmes would say that they were informally agreed upon. Which really meant that he made up the rules to suite himself.

“By the way, Hobson, you have surely noticed that all the Ivy League universities have revered team sports since their very inception. They are a means of cementing students together, raising rules of the game to a sacred level.”

“Colmes,” I sighed. “Is this the only reason you summoned me? To make our past debates a kind of debating game? I am trying to write a dissertation, you know.”

“I will withhold any comment on that,” said Colmes with a wry smile.

I had left myself open on that, and deserved any sarcastic comment he might choose to make about my inability to get my dissertation done.

“Do you remember our student Hou Wang?” he asked as though we were starting our conversation afresh.

“I certainly do. A brilliant student.”

“Indeed, indeed. I just received a frantic phone call from him asking for my help.”

“What? Surely it’s not something to do with our little cheating discussion?”

“It certainly is. He has been fired from his position. It seems that our dear Provost informed them that he in fact did not write his dissertation, that he paid someone else to ghost write it.”

I was aghast and could not believe it.

The case of cheating that I will now relate to you is not especially unique or different from the many cases of cheating Colmes has had referred to him. One would think that, given cheating in academia is absolutely forbidden, there would be no necessity to refer any case of cheating to Colmes. The rules were clearly stated in the University's handbook, and professors were encouraged to include a statement something like "cheating is a serious matter and may result in expulsion of the student from the university" in their class syllabus.

But before we get to the case in hand, you should know — and if you have been a student yourself no doubt you have experienced cheating either as a participant or recipient of cheating and its outcomes—that there are many forms of cheating in academia. Here is just a short list of some of the ways students may gain unfair advantage:

- Submit a paper as your own that was written by someone else (a friend or foe, bought off the internet)
- In a formal written exam, short answer or multiple choice, copy answers from a person sitting next to you (perhaps the more traditional form of cheating, commonly practiced throughout one's life beginning in kindergarten).
- Copying chunks of text from a text book, stringing them together to make a paper, commonly called plagiarism (a very complex form of cheating as we will see in a later case).
- Feigning illness during a formal exam, thus gaining more time or even a chance of a do-over.
- Claiming a disability (e.g. dyslexia) in order to get additional time to complete a formal exam.
- Students combining their efforts to complete a "take-home" exam. This is cheating unless assigned as a group effort by the teacher. The grading of these assignments is however fraught with difficulties, not the least being that there may be a freeloader in the group, who contributes little but still gets the group grade.

- Sneaking answers or forbidden materials such as books or notes into a formal exam.
- Requesting a bathroom break from a formal exam when it is not needed.
- Stealing a look at a formal exam paper ahead of time. This takes considerable effort and innovation on the part of the student or students.
- Bribing or other methods to get the answers to exam questions in advance.
- Asking a teacher to explain a particular multiple choice question in order to glean the correct answer.
- Sleeping with one's professor.

There are many more variations of the above. No doubt you are acquainted with many of them. The charge made against Hou Wang is one of the many types of cheating. This was unusual only because it was made a few years after the student had graduated and had a job elsewhere.

You will pardon me from indulging in a little, what one might say, racial or ethnic exegesis. I do this knowing that I may tread on a fine line and may perhaps fall off one side or the other. But it is necessary in order to understand the intricacies of this case.

Our Provost, as I have noted in other cases, is of Chinese origin, though I am not privy as to how much Chinese she is. I hasten to add that in my personal opinion the answer to that question is irrelevant to the actual substantive details of the case, that is, (1) whether or not employing a ghost writer is against the rules, and (2) does it make moral or ethical sense to retrospectively punish for the offense, the effects being catastrophic, that is, loss of one's job, and in all likelihood, making it impossible for Hou Wang to work in academia ever again. Is it simply a matter of whether what Hou Wang did was cheating or not? Or does that irascible fact of time erase or soften the offense?

But let me take my observations further, further than is wise, I admit. For it is my carefully considered observation that many whose background is similar to that of Hou Wang, educated in environments that place great emphasis on rote learning and

recitation, especially the recitation of texts (often religious or political) are more likely to be charged with various forms of plagiarism. And yes, you see where I am going. Might this not also apply to the Provost who, if my guess is right, comes from a similar background as Hou Wang, has herself committed such acts of cheating?

I followed Colmes into the Provost's office. I was surprised that he had allowed this to happen. For being her "guests" we were surely placed on a somewhat lower platform, under her watchful eye.

"Please take a seat, gentlemen," said the Provost calmly, "I will be with you in a moment, just finishing off the official five year plan that the faculty senate has approved, and it will now go to the President for his approval."

Colmes took up a chair across her desk and indicated me to do the same. He had a serious look, though I was not sure whether this was put on for her benefit. I also of course, remembered the past incident of the snakes, so although the social setting in the Provost's office may have appeared that she had the upper hand, Colmes held as always the ace card. However, as he often reminded me. You only get to play the ace card once.

The Provost continued to write. Colmes glanced at me as if warning me that a red light was approaching. "Who made the call to John Jay and made this preposterous allegation against one of our finest alumni?" he asked in a demanding, pedantically controlled voice.

The Provost did not look up. "The letter came from me, but it was typed up by one of my secretaries," she replied in a monotone.

"I am aghast, Madam Provost, at your recklessness," Colmes pronounced in his best anglicized Chicago accent. This was enough for her to put down her pen and look across the desk, first at Colmes then at me.

"I don't know how you put up with him and his hastiness," she addressed to me.

I shifted in my chair, but waited for Colmes to answer, since the question was really leveled at him.

"The revelation is all the more concerning should it become public knowledge. The media will have a field day with it," warned Colmes.

“So you don’t deny that the allegation is true?” asked the Provost, herself the picture of moral righteousness.

“That is irrelevant. But tell me, why did you do this? Do you not understand what you have done? These issues are complicated as you well know. They are best left alone and kept within the bounds of the academic institution. Furthermore, it is surely likely that similar activities go on at John Jay. It is not in their interest to have this revealed.”

The Provost began writing again and did not look up. Now her endemic rudeness showed, a fact of which Colmes would take advantage. He continued.

“It is puzzling to me, since I know that you are guilty of the same or similar offense, are you not?” Colmes had raised his voice at the end of the sentence, causing her to stop writing and stare at the paper upon which she wrote. “Are you not?” repeated Colmes aggressively.

I shifted on my chair and cleared my throat. The fact was, this was getting a bit too close to home. My own record was not unblemished. Who in academia could say they have not cheated in one way or another? Bearing in mind, of course, the huge array of actions that could fall under the general heading of “cheating.”

The Provost finally stopped her writing put down her pen, pushed back in her chair and asked both of us, “What do you want of me? To take back the accusation?”

“Madam Provost. I think only of the reputation of our fine institution, but also of the life and livelihood of our outstanding alumnus. He is an outstanding individual, given where he came from, well on with a wonderful career, much of it thanks to us, but also recognizing all that he has overcome in his life. has achieved wonders...”

“I think Mr. Hobson should perhaps leave us for a moment,” interrupted the Provost.

“Do not try to distract from the substance of this matter. My esteemed colleague and good friend is party to everything I do. He is completely trustworthy. At question here, Madam Provost, is your trust.” Colmes was now at his bullying best. I thought I saw her cringe just slightly, hunching her shoulders a little. She gave me a quick look, then turned back to Colmes.

“So what are we to do?” she asked plaintively.

Colmes changed slightly his position, and placed one hand

on her desk. “Who has dealt with this matter at John Jay?” Colmes asked now as though they were two friends plotting a course of action.

“Only my counterpart at John Jay.”

“And have you spoken directly with Hou Wang?” asked Colmes.

“No. I left it all up to their Provost.”

“Left what up to the Provost?”

“I did not make the first call. It was their Provost who called me. Someone had tipped him off. He would not tell me who.”

“Indeed! Indeed!” cried Colmes. “Now I see what has happened. Our Hou Wang has an enemy. And most likely that enemy is someone working for the CCP.”

“The who?” asked Provost Dolittle. I was glad she asked.

“The Chinese Communist Party. They never forget or forgive,” pronounced Colmes with much affected authority. In any case, I believed it.

The room fell silent. Colmes looked across at me, as though expecting me to say something. Provost Dolittle returned to her writing. We were at an impasse.

For some reason, I was stirred to speak. I returned Colmes’s look and made the plunge.

“If we are honest,” I mused, as though speaking in a tutorial, “cheating is inevitable, indeed, cannot be avoided. Everyone does it. It’s just the unlucky ones who get caught. And there are some who have suffered so much in life, they deserve a break...”

Madam Provost looked up from her writing and slowly and carefully put down her pen. But it was my boss Colmes who picked up the point, though not in a way I would have liked.

“Right you are, Hobson. But that does not solve our problem of how to repair the damage done.”

I was about to respond when the Provost intervened. “Everyone does not cheat, and in any case, even if they did, it does not excuse Hou Wang’s behavior. What would the roads be like if there were no punishments for traffic offenses, which everyone at some time in their lives commits?”

I stirred again. “It’s not so much a matter of whether to punish, but how much. Hou Wang has been punished by having his entire career destroyed, this after a stellar performance. It is excessively destructive. What if people who committed speeding

offenses lost their job for driving five miles per hour above the limit... their lives destroyed?"

At that moment there was a light knock at the door.

"Come!" called the Provost.

I walked a dapper, smartly dressed young man, thin, tall and standing stiffly upright like a staff, hands at his side, one hand holding a shiny new briefcase. For a moment I thought he was going to salute. It was Hou Wang. He looked younger than he did five years ago when he defended his dissertation.

"Come!" beckoned Colmes, "we were just finishing up."

The Provost glared at Colmes. We were neither finished, nor anywhere near a solution, as far as she was concerned.

Hou Wang stood nervously facing us all. There were no other chairs, and I quickly realized that Doctor Dolittle had no intention of calling for one. So I did. "Here, take my chair," I said as I made for the door and called for a chair. Hou Wang bowed slightly, his eastern habits still with him. But he remained standing. Colmes stood and shook his hand.

"Very nice to see you again after all these years," he said cordially.

"Thank you for inviting me," said Hou Wang, smiling nervously. Colmes could not help admiring his handsome eastern face, large brown eyes and beautifully smooth olive skin, a small nose and a thin mouth that lit up his entire face when he smiled.

"Do you have an appointment?" asked the Provost coldly. "Your name is not in my calendar."

By this time I had returned with another chair, but it was clear that Hou Wang wanted to stand. He opened his briefcase and retrieved a large stack of papers and placed them on the Provost's desk.

"What is this?" asked the Provost, as though he had dumped a rotten apple on her desk.

"It is his dissertation draft with corrections and additions, if I am not mistaken," intervened Colmes. "I remember it well."

"How come?" asked the Provost, clearly getting set for a fight.

"You forget that I was on his dissertation committee. In fact it was I who advised him to have a professional writer go over his work."

My jaw dropped, as did the Provost's. "You what?" she

asked, like a dog following a scent.

“You heard me. I have done this with many of the doctoral students I have supervised over the years, especially those whose mother tongue is not English. I see no reason why they should be discriminated against simply because they cannot write flowing and fluent English as do those who are fortunate enough to have been born into the English speaking peoples.” All of this Colmes had said with a wry smile. It was his turn to be righteous.

“I will need to speak with the President about this,” mumbled Doctor Dolittle, indicating that she didn’t really mean it.

“If I may,” said Hou Wang nervously, “I simply took the advice of my supervisor. And besides all of my friends did the same, and it is standard practice at John Jay to help those whose mother tongue is not English.”

The suggestion that John Jay was a step ahead of our school in reaching out to help foreign students, of which there was a rapidly growing number, and an important source of income to the university in times of budget freezes, was not lost on the Provost. She looked across to Colmes expecting him to speak up in support of his former student. But Colmes knew that this was a moment to let the Provost stew a little.

Seeing that he was making progress, Hou Wang then made a serious error. He took his argument a little further. “Some of my friends in grad school, and even some that I supervise at John Jay, pay professional statisticians to do complex statistical analyses if necessary. After all, that is what many seasoned academics do these days, as I understand it.”

Doctor Dolittle sat dumbfounded. Colmes, sensing a pivotal moment, stood up and began in his characteristic fashion to walk back and forth in front of the Provost’s desk. She looked at him with nothing less than scorn. “Times change,” he waved his arm around to emphasize the point. We must change with them,” he pronounced.

“Let me see your papers here,” said the Provost as she reached for the dog-eared draft of his original dissertation. There were notes and comments scribbled all through it. Then Hou Wang produced a bound monograph from his briefcase, the finished submitted version of his dissertation. She quickly scanned a few pages and compared them to the original. They

were obviously a distinct improvement, in fact excellent English. On the other hand, the original draft was written in grammatically correct English, but simply did not have the flow of proper English, and was not so easy to understand. Colmes watched her closely.

“If I may,” said Hou Wang, “I think it is clear that I actually wrote the dissertation, but the professional polished it into a form that made the English more English, if you understand me.”

“Indeed we do,” intervened Colmes.

The Provost looked up, handed the copies of the dissertation back to Hou Wang, then said with a frown, “wait outside my office while we consider the matter.”

I was expecting Colmes to say that he need not leave. But he did not. And found out why as soon as Hou Wang had left.

“Madam Provost,” addressed Colmes, “you understand what is at stake here. I will, if necessary take the steps to exonerate this fine young man and get him re-instated in his position at John Jay. He has a wonderful career ahead of him, and has overcome many great challenges. He deserves nothing less. Besides, it is clear that in fact he has not cheated at all. Simply taken advantage of opportunities provided him, not to mention some of this at the recommendation of his adviser, that is, I. However, it is you who mistakenly jumped to the conclusion that he had cheated, and you who did him this terrible damage. Therefore it is you who must make this right.” Colmes stood and raised his body straight so that he looked down upon what looked like the crunched up body of the Provost. I looked in awe as Colmes played the bully as he was want to do.

Doctor Dolittle sat, morose, looking down. Colmes laid it on a little more.

“I insist that you fix this,” frowned Colmes.

The Provost remained silent. Then slowly, she looked up from her desk. “I will make the necessary calls to John Jay and get him reinstated. However, I will not do this until after I have cleared this with the President. In any case, any official business between this university administration and that of another university has to be approved by the president.”

“That is your call,” said Colmes, “though my advice to you, and actually to the president as well, is that the less he knows the better.”

And there, I leave it. Another complex case solved by Colmes using nothing more than a little gentle persuasion. Of course, he did not need to mention anything of the snake. It lay there curled up. Always ready to strike.

