Reframing the Visualizing Cultures Controversy: Let’s Talk about the Digital Medium

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Let’s Talk about the Digital Medium

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Eight years have lapsed since the Visualizing Culture controversy broke out at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 2006. As the then head of Foreign Languages and Literatures, I was deeply engaged in a peacemaking mission to help my colleagues Shigeru Miyagawa and John Dower reach out to the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA) at MIT and build an open and constructive dialogue with each other. That was not a difficult task. The professors were attentive and receptive, and the student representatives in turn censured online extremist behaviors targeted toward Miyagawa. The solution was simple and swift—the students’ association made a concerted effort to calm down the US-based agitators, and the professors added a disclaimer to the controversial images displayed on their website.

The tempest, however, kept roiling despite the reconciliation. It gained a second life as a media story that came to be marked by a double syndrome of
the racialization of the incident and a concomitant reactivation of Cold War ideology against the “rogue nation,” China. To make that discursive strategy work, US media journalists framed the protesting Chinese students not as individual actors imbued with their own flaws and idiosyncrasies but as victims manipulated by a repressive homeland regime notorious for its censorship rigor. That leap in logic dictated that the Chinese student community at MIT be infantilized and reduced, in representation, to the dummy instruments of a government whose evil scheme of censoring free content was said to have crossed the Pacific Ocean and infiltrated the US academy. The resulting frame was summarized in a predictably dichotomous media discourse that pits Chinese communist youth patriots against the freedom fighters of the US academy. The controversy was no longer about cultural sensitivity or questions about the representation of violence. Nor was it anymore about China versus Japan but, rather, Red China versus Free America, authoritarianism versus democracy. What more can be said in the face of such stark binarism? You are either one of us, or one of them, friend or foe.

The airing of such a position would be a legitimate pursuit if it were balanced by other voices and other interpretations. Unfortunately, those who dared to speak out and analyze in the interest of what academia holds sacrosanct—making a critique—could not gain easy access to mainstream media outlets. Although the tone of discussion by front-line participants on academic forums such as H-Asia had turned from irrational ejaculations to a constructive debate about the controversy, the US-based media, including the *Chronicle of Higher Education,* persistently withheld coverage of alternative views on the incident.¹ The racialization of the controversy was ominously successful. It brewed a prevalent editorial bias against those submissions by Chinese commentators who opted to express viewpoints different from the mainstream interpretation of the controversy. I myself experienced that discrimination firsthand, although I was born and raised in Taiwan. Indeed, as this controversy evolved, the boundary between the censors and the censored went blurring, and a media onslaught in defense of free speech ended up violating its own principle.²

Luckily, thanks to the Internet, nobody could muffle my voice or anybody’s for long. I posted my views on H-Asia and on my MIT home page, which enjoyed modest traffic from time to time.³ This brings me to the
theme of this reflective piece. Let’s face it: this incident would not have occurred without the Internet. So why can’t we shift our attention from a flawed, dichotomous ideological frame to one that would be more relevant to an online controversy, that is, the digital medium itself. That was my viewpoint then and I will reiterate it now.

The educational opportunities provided by this controversy were too precious to let go, not merely because it posed a challenge to MIT’s OpenCourseWare (OCW) and possibly other emerging expertise-based online publishing platforms such as the massive open online courses (MOOCs). More importantly, the controversy also opened our eyes to the destabilizing effect of knowledge production in the digital era and the public’s role in producing and disseminating knowledge on the Net. By putting aside the familiar question about ideology, that is, nationalism, we can better reflect on digital media and the perils of online participatory culture. I quote what I said at the height of the debate in 2006: “The most important issue neglected in this debate is the question regarding public access to educational and research materials posted online. OCW is a global medium and a global classroom. But is there such a thing as a singular ‘global’ or ‘universal’ audience for digitally delivered open content?”

That question might have sounded outlandish eight years ago, but by now the answer seems to be an indisputable “no.” Knowledge has become unstable because it picks up the unstructured, unsettled, and unbounded properties of the digital medium. There is no such thing as a global audience who shares the same history and the same values. OpenCourseWare and all virtual classrooms are enabled by digital media. What the Visualizing Cultures controversy ignited was in part a crisis about all forms of digital publishing: materials published online are never going to be completely acceptable to a global audience that straddles diverse ethnic, cultural, religious, national, and ideological borders. In fact, the more controversial a published image or a text is, the more likely it will provoke negative responses and random assaults. Venturing into the digital commons as authors necessarily entails taking a risk no matter who we are.

To pursue this line of logic, I may add that those who accused student protesters of willfully separating those violent images from the professors’ carefully crafted “context” were themselves ignorant of the fundamental
nature of digital texts and digital reading. In cyberspace, contextualization is never enough. The digital medium has changed our habit of reading, and context has become increasingly irrelevant. Web surfing enables and encourages decontextualization. We click open a link, linger there for less than a minute, and then move on to the next link merrily. With each click, we risk taking pictures and words out of context, and the illustration of expertise knowledge is in constant jeopardy. All it takes is a tap on a hyperlink. Surfing means just that—skipping around from article to article, from image to image, from the textual to the visual and even the auditory, back and forth and across mediums, and in this case, from MIT’s home page to the controversial images embedded within the OCW site.

Indeed, some critics argued that because those disturbing images didn’t appear on the front page of MIT’s website, their harmfulness was greatly exaggerated by the contending students. This cognitive error should be redressed immediately. Offensive images that are submerged in the text attract as much attention as that appearing on a home page because they are just a few clicks away. Only if we read the Visualizing Cultures site like a traditional book will the savage images be shielded from the viewer. But who would read the Internet linearly in today’s media environment? Who would stay away from URLs and wait to decipher a beckoning image until after they finish reading a long, explanatory text?

Whether we should endorse or lament our changing reading habits is a different debate altogether. Those who insist that digital navigators should function no less differently than the readers of print media simply fail to understand how the Net works. The speed and immediacy with which we access online content can hardly be overstated. Posting a class on OCW thus entails a responsibility different from that of contextualizing material in a traditional classroom setting.

The implications of teaching in a digital space that we professors cannot control, monitor, or guide is a topic that requires a full-length article to do justice to. For me at least, launching a serious discussion about media and audience in the digital era is as important as making inquiries about the low threshold of Chinese patriots in dealing with violent images that revolve around unresolved historical trauma between two rival nations.

To complicate things, new media provide each and every individual the
means not only to transmit information instantaneously (as the Chinese
students did) but also to talk back to us and protest just as fast. Here I
saw several cultural misunderstandings on the students’ part that turned
their actions against themselves. The protest culture in the United States
is a complex one to say the least, in which citizens from “rogue nations”
can only partake at their own peril. Perhaps more importantly, they had
misgauged the US appetite for antagonistic discourses. Learning how to
disagree using calculated politeness is often a lesson difficult to master for
digital natives who grew up with blatantly contentious discourses prevalent
on the Chinese Internet. Young students from China often suffer from con-
flicting identities—quiet and passive in the classroom, but loquacious and
seditious online. The anonymity of the Internet turned the digital space into
a no-man’s-land where protocols for civil exchanges are nonexistent when-
ever a polarizing controversy arises.

There is no shortage of media reports on China’s cyber vigilantism,
particularly its offline consequences, set in motion by in-the-flesh search
engines. These are voluntary human-powered witch hunts orchestrated by
morally righteous netizens who target lawless and venal officials as well
as cheating spouses and other types of transgressors. While a controversial
topic in itself, cyber violence is given a new twist in China since the Web
is seen by many as the only venue for citizens to enforce moral sanctions
against social injustice. Whether this type of cyber-populism is harmful or
conducive to the growth of democracy in China is being debated. But the
few hate mails Professor Miyagawa received in 2006 brought to my attention
the haunting logic of cyber justice in the MIT controversy. There is defi-
nitely a tangible link between netizens participating in vigilante searches
to oust the public enemy and the Chinese overseas students setting out to
expose what they believed to be transgressive behaviors committed by the
two professors. Luckily, the storm was quelled before it attracted wide atten-
tion on the Chinese Net in the mainland. And I found it miraculous that
the looming danger of a massive human-flesh hunt was nipped in the bud,
thanks to the collaborative endeavors of the two professors and the MIT
student community.

All of us involved in this controversy gained a few lessons in the end. For
us professors in elite institutions, this Internet incident has surely taught
us to be more vigilant about teaching in the virtual space, and it surely also punctuated the coming of the democratization of knowledge making whether we like it or not. For Chinese students inside and outside MIT who started this controversy, they should be impressed with the urgency of learning those protocols that can teach them how to manufacture dissent in a framework understandable and acceptable to this part of the world. For me, another takeaway lesson is what I learned forty years ago when I first landed in the United States: mainstream Western media will never let go of any opportunity to engage in China bashing because we have not left behind Cold War politics after all.

Notes

1. I sent a short commentary to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* immediately after they published a piece that reduced the controversy to a single point of view (i.e., Chinese students threatening the academic freedom of the United States). See “Jing Wang on the MIT Controversy,” posted on *H-Asia*, (May 2, 2006), h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-Asia&month=0605&week=a&msg=zprybT/ydR0fMRX6fkrzw&user=&pw=. I was met with total silence until I wrote and demanded a response. Winnie Wong, the coeditor of this special issue, was another person who critiqued the *Chronicle*’s interpretation of the controversy in her letter to the editor, and she received the same silent treatment. These occurrences led us to speculate that our last names might have signaled to the *Chronicle* editors that we, too, were agitating “Chinese nationals.” Several other incidents also drove home my point about the racialization of the MIT controversy. Shortly after the controversy broke out, a Japanese journalist working for *Asahi Shimbun* (*The Japan Times*) came to Boston to interview Dower, Miyagawa, and myself. I was interviewed because my point of view was taken to be antagonistic to the “American” point of view, and because of that, I was identified by the reporter as a mainland Chinese national who could represent the “mainland China point of view” for his news story. After an hour-long interview, I accidentally informed him that I grew up in Taiwan and that I am a US citizen. He appeared a bit distraught and apologized to me.

Throughout the months of April and May of 2006, I encountered various instances of what I would call the “racialization of point of view.” Right after the incident, I was put under tremendous pressure to hold teach-ins on campus, with the expectation that I would publicly criticize the MIT’s Chinese students community and guide them into the right course of action. It was assumed that this would be a very effective strategy if a “Chinese” professor could stand up and condemn the “barbarous behavior” of Chinese students. Those who made the teach-in requests also assumed that being a naturalized US citizen, I would
undoubtedly stand by the “American” point of view on this controversy. There were other layers of identity politics that played into those requests that I will not enumerate here. When I refused to take sides and withheld the pressure of holding teach-ins that were to be framed in that limited and partial context, more oppressive tensions piled on. I subsequently turned down other requests, which in my view would only escalate the emotionalism surrounding the controversy and endanger my peacemaking mission.

I continued my mission in private, spending hours on translating statements issued by both the MIT authorities and the CSSA from English into Chinese and vice versa so that they could better understand each other’s points of view. More importantly, I instructed the leaders of CSSA on how to diffuse the crisis and how to quiet down the overflow of protesting e-mails, and in the process, I taught them how to appreciate the US protocol of dissent and understand their own action in light of Western academic culture. Certainly, my own strategy is culturally embedded: rather than adding fuel to a fire, I chose to diffuse hostility behind closed doors. I was less cognizant then than I am now of the cultural clash of crisis management. But I remain convinced to this day that had I bent to a more confrontational strategy, the situation would have deteriorated further and benefited nobody.

The simple fact was that the more pressure I was put under to choose sides, the more determined I was to resist such pressure. For the majority of the spectators of this controversy on campus at that time, the choice I made—taking a position that was neither “Chinese” nor “American”—was unacceptable and incomprehensible. The atmosphere in 2006 was so explosive that the communications between myself and those who accused me of not cooperating were totally blocked.

2. This was hardly a surprising dynamic since it was not the first time those upholding freedom of expression ended up suppressing views that they did not like.


4. See Wang, “Jing Wang on the MIT Controversy.”


6. One of the chief officers at the CSSA insisted in an e-mail addressing Shigeru Miyagawa and myself on April 26, 2006, “To be frank, if it is Prof. Dower’s name, or Prof. Jing Wang’s name, or even my name that appears in the contact information section [of the OCW site], Prof. Dower/Wang/or I will be flooded with protesting emails and even life-threat. People are not offended by the person who prepared these material, rather, it is the material themselves that offend people.”

In an open letter to the MIT community, “On the ‘Visualizing Cultures’ Controversy and Its Implications,” written by the MIT Chinese Students and Scholars Association, it was reported that “the opening paragraph of The Tech’s initial reporting of the issue (April
28th [2006]) misleadingly cast the issue as one of censorship versus sensitivity. The reporters also conveniently excluded Chinese students from any of its dozen or so quotes, and decided not to place the official letter or statement from CSSA alongside those from the two professors and the Institute.” See “On the ‘Visualizing Cultures’ Controversy and Its Implications,” *MIT Faculty Newsletter* 18, no. 5 (2006), www.web.mit.edu/fnl/volume/185/cssa.html.

7. The students of MIT’s Chinese Students and Scholars Association who initiated the protest insisted that they had scrutinized the context before they decided to raise concerns. However, after the controversy spun out of their control, many protesting e-mail letters sent from the other parts of the United States seemed to have focused entirely on the images. It was those protestors that drove their critics’ assumption that Chinese students decoupled the images from the written context provided by the two professors.
