Jing Wang on the MIT Controversy over "Visualizing Cultures"

May 2, 2006 (posted on H-Asia)

Dear Mr. Peter Monaghan,

I just read the article (in The Chronicle of Higher Education) you wrote on the MIT controversy over Visualizing Cultures, part of MIT's OCW (OpenCourseWare). http://chronicle.com/temp/email2.php?id=CzDSnNpHpMpzHZYYHhFF3dNr5nf5j6hb It appears that your report does not present a complete or impartial view. This very complex controversy calls for nuanced discussions. There are multiple layers of issues embedded in this highly emotional debate. There is more than what immediately meets the eye.

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? What kind of room do we (or should we) allow technologically enabled audiences (of different ethnic cultures and nationalities) to partake in knowledge production? Do professors have the sole monopoly over knowledge production and dissemination in the age where knowledge is collectively produced?

These questions need to be addressed. At the same time, I regret that there were members in the Chinese community who responded to the creators of Visualizing Cultures in extreme and irrational manner, failing to understand that the professors did not intentionally try to offend them. This said, it is equally irrational for any of us to demonize the entire Chinese student community. Let us resist the temptation of reducing this complex controversy into a simplified issue about Chinese nationalism vs. American academic freedom. I myself, being a veteran academic, support the principle of academic freedom. But with freedom comes responsibility, and in this case, responsibility for being sensitive to potentially offensive materials published on the MIT Homepage. The very fact that my colleagues John Dower and Shigeru Miyagawa took pains to work with the Chinese student community after the outbreak of the controversy has indicated that they take such responsibilities seriously. Their efforts are to be commended.

The Chronicle article strongly implied that the site was pulled down at the Chinese students' request. Such was not the case. Professors Dower and Miyagawa made the decision to temporarily remove the site so that they and the Chinese student community could work out the concerns together in open, constructive dialogues. The students were very modest in their requests for better contextualization of the controversial materials (see their open letter to the President of MIT: http://cssa.mit.edu/new/forum/index.php?act=calendar&code=showevent&eventid=167

I had a teach-in of this controversial topic in my class today. As the concluding note of my response to the Chronicle article, I would like to share with you one of my students' comments:

"...I believe we can best frame the issue by placing ourselves directly in this situation. What would our reaction be if a group or another country depicted Americans in a racially-insulting or racially-defeatist manner?...As I mentioned in class, Time Magazine recently had to deal with such an issue, and there have been numerous cases afterward. If we view the situation in that framework, I believe that we can at least empathize if not sympathize with the reaction of the Chinese and Chinese-American communities."

Sincerely yours,

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