

Guest Editors' Introduction

Unpacking a Controversy: National Histories, Visual Cultures, and Digital Dissent

Jing Wang and Winnie Won Yin Wong

In April 2006, Chinese students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) mounted a protest over the appearance, on an MIT website, of historical Japanese war propaganda depicting the victorious killing of Chinese, Russian, and Korean enemy soldiers. The site on which the propaganda appeared was featured on the MIT homepage, and for two consecutive days, clicking from that homepage led the public to a large set of wartime images made during the 1894–95 Sino-Japanese war and the 1904–5 Russo-Japanese war. These images, some of which appeared gruesome while others innocuous, were embedded in the Visualizing Cultures website, a component of OpenCourseWare, which is a digital education initiative that MIT pioneered in 2001. On the day when “Throwing Off Asia”—a five webpage section on the Sino-Japanese War—was highlighted on the MIT homepage, a woodblock print that depicted Japanese soldiers beheading Chinese

prisoners of war caught the attention of Chinese students on campus (See Benjamin Elman, fig. 1, in this special issue, 17).

According to the commonly held view, students who were shocked that such an image was being shown on their school's website spread the news within and outside the campus without closely examining the texts surrounding those images, a view to which we will return later for closer scrutiny. The website itself provided no space for online comments or discussion, and so the protest that ensued took the form of e-mails and telephone calls, and one in-person discussion forum, among students, the MIT administration, and the faculty and staff associated with the website. The e-mails and telephone calls, however, soon came in the thousands from outside MIT, from across the United States and China, and from the Chinese diaspora. The author of the webpage, Professor John Dower, had provided no e-mail address on the webpage itself or on MIT's official directory for correspondence, but the site's only other listed faculty author, Professor Shigeru Miyagawa, received a deluge of e-mails and telephone calls, which included several violent and racist threats to himself and his family. As the responses grew overheated, the Chinese students at MIT who initiated the protest moved sensibly to condemn such reprehensible actions and pleaded on online bulletin board systems (BBS) for such intimidation to stop. The web pages were removed for approximately ten days by the authors, edited, and then restored with "warnings" to those who would find the images offensive. The damage, however, was done, and an on-campus dispute between students and professors, fueled by media reports, spilled over into the global realm. In the Chinese media, the incident was readily interpreted as yet another sign of Japan's disregard for its past war crimes and the standard hypocrisy of Western powers for condoning China's victimization. In the US media, the incident was quickly interpreted as a battle between "Red China" and "Free America" and cast in an irreversible and irrevocable frame of US academic freedom violated by young malicious Chinese censors.¹

Why do we want to revisit the controversy almost a decade later? What are the stakes for people like us, a Cantonese-Canadian and a Taiwanese-born US citizen who has lived in the United States for forty years? We can cite many reasons: intellectual curiosity, commitment to our integrity as cultural critics, but most importantly, the responsibility of rediscovering

issues that were summarily closed in 2006 by that same irrevocable framework but that continued to resonate with us in our ever-intense quest for a future in which war of all kinds, including those of race and culture, vanish from sight.

To begin, there are basic values that the contributors of this special issue uphold. Hate speech is utterly unacceptable. Although dissension is a natural right to which we are all entitled, no one should turn it into an instrument of harassment without inviting public censure. Apart from pointing a finger at those obvious acts of aggression, we edited this special issue not to arbitrate who was right and who was wrong but to refocus ourselves on those critical questions that befuddled many of us who observed and participated in the controversy in 2006. In the realm of ideas, there is no right and wrong to speak of, only the incessant desire and hope for productive intellectual sparring and two-way dialogue.

At the outset of this project, we invited each of the sitting members of the board of the Visualizing Cultures project, including professors John Dower and Shigeru Miyagawa, to contribute essays to this special issue, but they declined our invitations. Without the wider perspective and dialogue that these scholars would have brought, this project took on a different tenor, and we instead turned our attention to a broad interrogation of wartime imagery and the representation of violence, student activism and image-driven nationalism in cyberspace, visualized Sino-Japanese relations, digital pedagogy, and the impact of the Internet on knowledge production. Each of these issues calls for nuanced discussion and each recasts the 2006 controversy in larger critical inquiries that have repercussions beyond the field of Asian studies. The essays in this volume are thus tied in one endeavor—providing longer and more layered historical contexts for conflicts like the Visualizing Cultures controversy, and examining the crisscrossing contexts of digital content with a critically balanced mindset. Together, these contributors offer multiple avenues for understanding why the controversy broke out and how it was represented in the public sphere.

There were many strands of controversy that divided the interpreters and participants of the debate back in 2006.² A large number of scholars saw the controversy as a disturbing symptom of Chinese nationalism and online vigilantism, whose indoctrinated young agents were challenging the

academic freedoms held sacred by US professors, and that indeed, the protest amounted to Chinese censorship of US scholarship. On the opposite end, critics considered the incrimination of the student protesters as equally problematic and saw it as a refusal to grant the time-honored US ideal of student activism to Chinese students in particular. However, straddled between those two opposite poles of opinion (i.e., blatant censorship and the right of students to protest) are other frames of debate that can draw us into more complex discussions of what was actually raised by the controversy.

*I can vaguely remember the images. It was not the images that I found objectionable.*³ At the heart of the controversy was whether the students failed to read the explanatory text and reacted to images alone, or whether they were critiquing the texts simultaneously. Huan Zhang, the author of the above quote and who served in 2006 as the president of the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA) at MIT, emphasized repeatedly that the students struggled with the texts too, not with the images alone. He was insistent then, as he is now, about this important distinction (see his interview in this special issue).⁴ The formal complaints lodged by CSSA officers, according to him, were primarily about the “unclear [narrative] voices” of the “Throwing Off Asia” author and that some passages accompanying those images failed to find a critical voice. The offensive examples that the CSSA protest letter cited included this passage from the Visualizing Cultures website: “When all was said and done, what they visualized was beautiful, heroic, and modern war. Still, predictable patterns give order to this chaos. Discipline (the Japanese side) prevails over disarray (the Chinese). . . . In short, the Chinese are riotous in every way disgracefully so in their behavior, and delightfully so in their accoutrements.”⁵

For the students who launched the protest, passages like those above sent an objectionable message because, in the dissenters’ view, such descriptions did not pointedly support the thesis that the images at issue were propagandistic, racist, and nationalistic. Unfortunately, the caption for the controversial image, “Illustration of the Decapitation of *Violent* Chinese Soldiers” (italics ours), offered little help in making viewers grasp the sympathetic, critical analysis intended and delivered by the author. The word *violent* in the image caption was in fact not intended to be descriptive but was taken from the Japanese inscription on the print itself, accusing the Chinese pris-

oners of war of an attempted escape in order to justify their execution. We could indeed debate the art of captioning sensitive materials, but instead of deploring “how easy it is for images to be misunderstood,”⁶ might it not be more productive for critics to ask how expert writing, scholarly conventions, and formal analysis should be deployed in the public sphere and made legible to lay readers? When written for a website, need we give more attention than we usually do to the visual and textual implications of our pedagogy? Sympathizers of the students may push the envelope even further by asking, isn’t there some intellectual basis for someone to find the texts in “Throwing Off Asia” troubling and in need of editorial attention? But shouldn’t we give equal weight to the equally convincing counterargument: can a single author really be held accountable to criticism from all global corners of the vast Internet audience? On top of all those complexities, we might also consider the proposition that reading online is an exercise totally different from reading, citing, and interpreting a print publication, a point that deserves more attention than it was afforded in 2006 precisely because universities today are widely adopting online and digital platforms in pedagogy.⁷

Undoubtedly, no one would or should question the two professors who intended to demonstrate the ways with which the atrocities depicted in those graphic images were visualized for political purposes. In the middle of the controversy, Professor Dower explained patiently in a public statement that the images and text are intended to “to illuminate aspects of the human experience—including imperialism, racism, violence and war—that we must confront squarely if we are to create a better world.”⁸ Indeed, Dower and Miyagawa received an outpouring of support not only from many colleagues and alumni of MIT but also from several lone mainland Chinese sympathizers who expressed admiration for the two professors’ courage to withstand attacks.⁹ (Here Zhou Kui’s contribution to this issue is useful in its delineation of the mirror responses of netizens living in mainland China.) But if we take the position that the texts rather than the images were at the center of contention and that the students’ take on the texts differed in ways intended by the professors, then the original accusation that the MIT students purposefully decontextualized an image to instigate a malicious attack does not stand well.

Much of the contestation over the interpretations of the Visualizing Cul-

tures webpage as it appeared in 2006 raises crucial questions of the expert and native divide, a problematic familiar to anthropologists and cultural studies critics. Who holds a privileged viewpoint over the images, texts, or even the history of a tribe or a nation—experts or natives? This difficult question is given an additional layer of complexity in the digital era in which everyone has become a self-publishing author who can disseminate views faster than experts. What are the appropriate measures of engagement and responsibility that govern those who voice dissent in a digital civil society? To what extent should academic intellectuals be obliged to explain the critical force of their work in generalist frames to the nonacademic community and the wider public? As one individual protester put it, “When OpenCourseWare makes all of its materials accessible to the world, it’s no longer merely an academic tool, it has become mass media.”¹⁰ How do we present our research on controversial subjects to the general public, or represent it on our own institutional websites? This is something that remains relevant today whether we are speaking of the 2006 webpages or the emerging digital classrooms designed for massive open online courses.

But even if we made a distinction of the “war on the text” from the “war on imagery,” our task would only be half done. For the majority of the hate mail Miyagawa received hinged upon a single image—the “Illustration of the Decapitation of Violent Chinese Soldiers.” No matter how hard the CSSA officers tried to dissociate themselves from these image-driven protesters, what persisted in the US media was a homogenized picture of young Chinese “Red Guards,” who irresponsibly mass-circulated a lone image of the beheading of Chinese prisoners by Japanese soldiers as though it represented the point of view of Dower, Miyagawa, or, indeed, that of MIT. In the town-hall-style meeting where the professors and students met for the first time in a well-intentioned attempt to communicate with each other, those present, including one of the editors, could recall the occasional outbursts from some agitated students who cried out in dismay, “This is not a correct image!”¹¹ So certainly, the image issue loomed large, even though we should not mistakenly collapse all the text-driven protesters into image-driven agitators.

Several contributors in this special issue explicitly deal with the interpretation of this war over visual images. Benjamin Elman reads into it the

changing political discourse of “Old China” and “New Japan” and interprets the students’ protest as a symptom of the power reversal of the two rivaling nations, while James Hevia advises us to resituate the image in a global framework, “if for no other reason than to destabilize the China-Japan binary.”

Speaking of images in an intellectually responsible manner entails confronting an uncomfortable, controversial perspective. As an MIT student commentator wrote:

I would like to get an idea of people’s opinion on obscene art, particularly cultural and racially charged artwork, such as the artwork in question, as well as images of the Holocaust, etc. Is it okay to show images such as these if they are classified as “art” or “history” and if they are historical? . . . Even with proper context and descriptions, the idea of these images posted on OCW might still bother a lot of people.¹²

A handful of similarly minded critics echoed these concerns and wondered whether certain types of images might, by their very nature, be inherently unsuitable for reproduction on a nationally or globally visible forum.¹³ Some may dismiss such an argument by critiquing its underlying nationalist-racial logic, namely, that citizens of a nation necessarily share an aversion to graphic depictions that are racially insulting or racially defeatist. But are there visual representations that under any circumstance can be truly seen as repulsive to basic decency and that no kinds of contextualization, delivered with utter sensitivity, would be sufficient?¹⁴ By unearthing and republishing those atrocious images, are we necessarily colluding with recorded violence? These are questions that Tani Barlow takes up in her contribution to this issue, when she reveals her own thought process in publishing and using images of victims of rape and murder. Ethical questions of this order are ultimately tied to the specter of (self-)censorship. And they represent a far more challenging task than a default position of railing against the Chinese censorship state or the US surveillance one. This dilemma of self-censoring images of violence was given a different name in Guobin Yang’s piece, which takes “critical reflexivity” as the starting point of all digitization practices.

Ultimately, we need to ask: Were the students “protesters” or “censors”?

More specifically, what is the boundary that separates the protestors from the censors, and how do we prevent debates over freedom and dissent from becoming a casualty of the dichotomizing Sino-US competition over political righteousness? These are the critical questions we hope readers of this special issue will decide for themselves after they finish exploring the multiple contexts out of which the MIT controversy evolved. Indeed, censorship, nationalism, and the narrative of victimization are three faces of the same coin, a tightly knit ideological affect several authors endeavor to put under scrutiny.

Opening this special issue, Benjamin Elman's essay places the images of the Sino-Japanese war within the historical narrative of Sino-Japanese relations, showing how dramatically the narrative has indeed changed and fragmented since the 1894–95 Sino-Japanese War, and especially during the twentieth-century meta-narrative of the mutual rise and decline of China and Japan. Opposite that long historical perspective, Zhou Kui's contribution chronicles the more immediate events in Sino-Japanese and Sino-US diplomatic relations in the three years leading up to 2006. He examines the debate agenda of the protestors in China's cybersphere of the time, for whom the interpretation of *daoqian* (apology) became a semiotic game in itself. Like Zhou Kui, Qin Shao's contribution fleshes out the broad Chinese public opinion that Japan's failure to come to terms with its imperialist past has fueled as many ongoing controversies as Chinese nationalism. She argues against the dismissal of the narrative of Chinese victimization and contends that US-based Asian studies scholars' first reactions to the controversy too easily gave way to an anti-China populism. In contrast to her position, William A. Callahan points to the narrative of "humiliation" as a continuing effect of China's national humiliation education campaigns in the post-Mao era, and he shows how patriotic indoctrination even underlies Xi Jinping's present-day discourse of the "China dream."

Regardless of which position one sides with, a century or more of historical memory and narration is constantly reactivated by present-day politics. A particularly illuminating example of this is shown in James Farrer's ethnographic account of the 2005 anti-Japanese demonstrations in Shanghai. Farrer's rich analysis of that protest demonstrates how narratives of national "histories" are woven by multiple interpretive communities (defined by

numerous racial, linguistic, and national allegiances), whose selective translation of controversial events generates new contexts and new biases.

To these positions, once again, a longer historical view provides food for thought, and several contributors wrestle with the history problematic from the angle of visual culture. The woodblock prints at the center of the MIT controversy throws us back, in James Hevia's words, to "the ongoing struggle over the meaning of the past 150 years of Sino-Japanese interaction." Winnie Wong examines that historical legacy as a visual and technological one, returning to Lu Xun's 1906 autobiographical story that narrates his reaction to a lantern slide of Japanese soldiers beheading a Chinese victim, exactly one hundred years before the MIT incident. She argues that the Lu Xun "slide moment" institutionally reenacts a spectacle of *forced witnessing* determined by the beheading images themselves. Reflecting further on how visual power functions in the intellectual sphere, Tani Barlow and William Callahan each probe how race and gender figure in these questions, showing how China's "century of humiliation" is a history narrated, in Callahan's words, through iconic photographs of "beheaded men and raped women."

Another arena to which our contributors turn are critical questions revolving around the digital medium. In her contribution, Jing Wang deconstructs the seemingly seamless continuum of *image* and *text* by arguing that surfing online necessarily entails decontextualization and the decoupling of the two. Building on Wang's positing of the digital as an analytical frame, Jack Qiu's study of Chinese youth digital nationalism takes us to the little-known history of the MIT BBS platform in which the initial round of the MIT students' protest was staged. Ironically, it was an indigenous Chinese platform shut down by Chinese government censors and forced to migrate overseas, to MIT! The BBS's forced exodus from Beijing accounts for "its distinct sense of independence from the Chinese authorities," a position that was woefully misunderstood by the media at the time of the 2006 controversy. In tracing contemporary Chinese image-centric nationalism to the evolving identity politics of the country's post-1980s generation, Qiu unravels the historical context surrounding the controversy bit by bit and delivers a detailed generational portrait of the protesters. Here the discussion of digital culture is rounded out by reminders from both Guobin Yang and Ian Condry of its built-in liberatory as well as contentious ethos. While Condry finds in

digital media the potential to deconstruct the racial stereotypes mobilized in visual imagery, Yang, wary of the moral ambiguity that often accompanies digital representation, holds the universities responsible for “educating the next generation of digital consumers, inventors, and critics.” These essays’ reflective stances on the potential and pitfalls of digital culture show us how the issues of historical and visual narrative analyzed in the preceding groups of essays is even further complicated by the participatory politics of the Internet.

Last but not least, race. It is a topic that weaves in and out of several pieces in this collection, just as it unavoidably impacted the framing of the 2006 MIT controversy. We saved this topic for last, since this is the most destructive and the hardest identity marker to deconstruct, not least because “postracial America” is more a fantasy than a reality. Jing Wang opens up her piece with her experience of the racializing turn of the controversy and its impact on its framing. Indeed, as ethnic Chinese, we two editors bore the stigma after the controversy made a racializing turn. When the controversy erupted, skin color, our names, and our ethnic origin all of a sudden became determining factors by which our intellectual identity was classified, just as for Shigeru Miyagawa, whose name made him the target of some hateful attacks. At the time, we two editors were both submitted to pressures that demanded we condemn wholesale the Chinese students. We both resisted, and continue to, not only because we find important issues of the intellect to debate here, but also because we have not yet given up the dream of holding onto an internationalist position, one that looms large in Tani Barlow’s piece. Barlow’s meditation on whiteness, Chineseness, and gender in academic controversies reminds us once more why it is essential to challenge the prevailing frame of “us vs. them” and “Americans vs. Chinese.” She makes a clarion call for all scholars, regardless of our identity markers, to make our positions politically progressive and legible.

In 2006, many assumptions were made about mainland Chinese students who were seen, even by scholars of Asia, as products of the party-state narrative of victimization, disruptive and hostile, devoid of humanistic aspirations and whose politics need to be treated with suspicion. An article published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* even recorded and implicitly endorsed a

suggestion that US institutions make *all* foreign students attend orientation sessions on US academic values.¹⁵ The invocation of race, and its slippage with citizenship, language, ethnicity, or indeed individuality itself, marked one of the most troubling moments of the controversy. Next to that was the civilizational discourse those of us ingrained with Edward Said's *Orientalism* feel compelled to critique. Luckily, the debate did not deteriorate any further. It is worth noting that the timely collaboration of the politically astute CSSA student committee with the responsible, generous, and learned authors of *Visualizing Cultures* was never about deciding who was right and who was wrong.

The *Visualizing Cultures* website has expanded and developed substantially since 2006, and we wholeheartedly applaud our colleagues for providing the Asian studies field with an invaluable and accessible resource. Today, it is hard to imagine that such a heated response greeted a history website. It is helpful to remember, though, that the controversy erupted at a particular historical moment: just at the time when US universities were venturing into establishing branch campuses in Asia and the Middle East and offering free curricula materials in the virtual space targeted to a global audience. These dual trends took place alongside the growing vitality of Chinese online citizenship as well as the unprecedented rise of Chinese overseas students enrolling in North American, British, Australian, and European postsecondary institutions. Together, these factors produced a potential for dynamism but also a number of ethical and intellectual questions that had not been faced by US academics before. What the 2006 events at MIT raised about the global and local contexts of reception are problems not at all unique to the 2006 controversy nor to the power dynamics of China, Japan, and the United States. Neither is the larger project of digital, open-access, and globalist humanities without its pitfalls. We thus ask readers to consider how an incident like the 2006 controversy might foreshadow future debates in which we might all be engaged.

Even in 2006, it would have been hard to imagine the extent to which our everyday lives have now moved online, nor the extent to which social media has integrated once-distant users. Teaching, research, and the digital publication of scholarship are far from exempt from this vast and ongoing trans-

formation. As the humanities moves inexorably toward digital frameworks as the basis of its scholarly activities, an incident such as the 2006 controversy spurs us to address many fundamental questions: To what extent should or could the norms of scholarship, pedagogy, and student (and public) interaction be altered by the digital turn? Are there rules of choosing what to digitize, as Guobin Yang poses in his piece on “reflexive digitization”? Can traditional scholarly and pedagogical activities contribute critically to the formation of this new digital world? In what ways can the emancipatory potential of digital technology help educators renew our pedagogical energy, a process that necessarily involves reckoning with public dissent and turning such dynamics into participatory knowledge production? Whether we answer James Farrer’s call of “returning to the classroom” or confront the question of the digital head-on at the editors’ bidding, this controversy provides many valuable teaching moments as well as provocative challenges to scholarship. The authors in this volume have all made contemplations on how we as teachers have learned from the Visualizing Cultures controversy.

The Internet contains sites with all kinds of repulsive content, including intentionally inflammatory and hate-inciting visual content targeting practically every identifiable group and minority. There will always be disagreement, and in some cases, righteous indignation, but in others, conscientious calls for social justice. Regardless of whether it is possible to develop digital open content that is accessible and acceptable to all, our call for contextualizing and examining digital global reception complements, rather than eliminates, the issue of freedom of expression. It is our hope that this volume will provide all of us an opportunity to reflect upon some of the challenges, limits, and possibilities that we have already faced in this globalizing digital sphere.

Notes

1. Benjamin P. Gleitzman, “Image Spurs Debate on Censorship versus Sensitivity,” *Tech* 126, no. 21 (2006): 1, 15, tech.mit.edu/V126/PDF/N21.pdf. Also see Peter Monaghan, “Open Doors, Closed Minds?,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 19, 2006, www.chronicle.com/article/Open-Doors-Closed-Minds-/16550/.

2. For example, two very cogently written, but diametrically opposed, characterizations of the protest can be seen in the CSSA's summary of its role and actions: MIT Chinese Student and Scholar Association, "On the 'Visualizing Cultures' Controversy and Its Implications," *MIT Faculty Newsletter* 18, no. 5 (2006), www.web.mit.edu/fnl/volume/185/cssa.html, and Peter Purdue's account, "Reflections on the 'Visualizing Cultures' Incident," *MIT Faculty Newsletter* 18, no. 5 (2006), www.web.mit.edu/fnl/volume/185/perdue.html. See also Qin Shao's discussion on the debate on the H-Asia e-mail Listserve, which represented opposing viewpoints on the controversy.
3. Huan Zhang; see his response to the editors' interview in this volume. We quote his answer to the questionnaire, "Can you still remember the image and describe it? What about it is most objectionable?"
4. We similarly hoped to interview John Dower and Shigeru Miyagawa on the controversy.
5. See CSSA, letter to the editor (official letter to MIT administration), *Tech* 126, no. 21 (2006), tech.mit.edu/V126/N21/letters21.html.
6. In the immediate wake of the controversy, several attempts were made by MIT authorities to hold panel discussions focusing on visual imagery. Jing Wang was invited to one such event during which panelists were asked to discuss "how easy it is for images to be misunderstood."
7. To quote the CSSA protest letter describing their reading: "The only circumstance under which these very racially-charged statements might be possibly acceptable is if they are being used to describe the depictions of the images. Yet at first glance, that purpose is far from obvious; instead, the text seems to suggest that it is reporting history itself. The issue of the blatant racism so prominently exhibited in these images and descriptions is not addressed until much further down the page, almost at the end of the article" (CSSA, letter to the editor).
8. John Dower and Shigeru Miyagawa, "Statement from Professors Dower and Miyagawa," *Tech* 126, no. 21 (2006): 15, tech.mit.edu/V126/PDF/N21.pdf.
9. The editors should note that there was no consensus among the MIT alumni to condemn the CSSA action. Since opinions were split, the MIT Alumni Association encouraged members to express their support individually to the professors, thus avoiding going through the motion of issuing a collective statement of condemnation of the students.
10. This quote was taken from a protest letter sent by a Dr. Shen from the University of Texas at Dallas, sent on April 28, 2006.
11. See Peter Purdue's account of this meeting, "Reflections." A video of the incident was recorded by an unidentified participant and posted online for several years.
12. In an effort to integrate the discussion of this controversy into her class in April 2006, Jing Wang asked her students to submit comments and opinions on the ongoing debate. This quote was submitted by one student to the discussion forum on May 1, 2006.

13. Several colleagues in foreign languages and literatures of MIT echoed that sentiment.
14. We quote an alumnus from Houston, “In my eyes, these things certainly are NOT arts, and I feel they are insults and humiliations to the ART and, more importantly, they are huge disrespects and insults to millions of the victims and their families and offspring. I cannot believe that MIT, one of the most prestigious universities in the world, could allow to post such webpages with an appreciation of the war violence and discrimination over a whole race.”
15. Monaghan, “Open Doors.”