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M.I.T. Education in Taiwan, Minus the Degree

By NOAM COHEN
Published: April 2, 2007

Correction Appended

LUCIFER CHU, a 31-year-old from Taipei, Taiwan, is as good an example as any of the shrinking distances between East and West.



Mr. Chu has become a millionaire by creating Chinese translations of fantasy novels. Using much of the \$1 million in royalties from his versions of "The Lord of the Rings," Mr. Chu says he devotes himself to distributing free translations of material from a [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#) Web site.

When M.I.T. introduced its OpenCourseWare project six years ago, it was a radical departure. The project was intended to make virtually all of the institute's course materials available online — free — over a 10-year period at the cost of \$100 million. (The material is provided under a Creative Commons license, which, among other things, forbids its being used for commercial purposes, but allows it to be copied and used for other purposes.)

The university's good intentions came with some concerns: it's not easy to share the lecture notes, slide presentations, sample tests, syllabuses and reading lists that go into an M.I.T. course. First, faculty members have to agree to go along. Also, the 25 people who work on OpenCourseWare have had to obtain permission to use other people's creative work that crops up in the slides and lectures.

Finally, there was the concern that if M.I.T. gives away this material, would students still pay the \$33,600 tuition to attend? It should go without saying that M.I.T. has continued to fill its classes, and that the piece of parchment with a graduate's name on it, or even a realistic copy, still cannot be found online.

If anything, university officials say, the material has served to stoke the interest of potential applicants.

"A student was going to be coming to M.I.T. as an undergrad, and he sent me an e-mail that said he had already attended my lectures," said Anant Agarwal, whose lectures for the introductory electrical engineering course are available as streaming video at the OpenCourseWare site, [ocw.mit.edu](#). "And he was from Malaysia."

In fact, things have been moving swimmingly, administrators say. By the end of the year, the first phase should be over, according to Steve Carson, the project's director of external relations, with nearly all 1,800 courses having some sort of representation online; the cost has been \$30 million.

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Currently, there are more than 1,600 courses published, and 2 million visits a month.

“It is so much bigger than we could have ever imagined,” said Shigeru Miyagawa, a professor of linguistics and Japanese, who was on the committee that originally proposed the plan. “The number of visits that we get is beyond belief. We really didn’t know who would be using it when we went into this at the very beginning.”

The president of M.I.T. at the time, Charles M. Vest, anticipated as much, saying that “there will probably be a lot of uses that will really surprise us and that we can’t really predict.”

Mr. Chu’s efforts qualify as a pleasant surprise. His team, which includes four full-time editors and scores of volunteers, has completed translations of 178 courses, and more than 600 partial ones. Thirty-five are good enough that M.I.T. links to them directly.

Mr. Chu personally worked on the introduction to electromagnetism, a subject that had bedeviled him at National Central University in Taiwan — he flunked it two times, he said. “I couldn’t help thinking that if I could have gotten a decent electrical magnetism teacher, and had it gone better, maybe I could be working at a big company in Taiwan,” he said.

Mr. Chu is proof that even translators can lose something in translation. He says he innocently adopted the English first name Lucifer as a teenager because of its poetic meaning in Latin, “light bearer.” Today, he says he travels Taiwan and China speaking on the opportunities from OpenCourseWare, using his royalty money to address an estimated total audience of 50,000, telling them to take advantage of “good people with the good will to share their knowledge.”

The M.I.T. OpenCourseWare Web site demands a lot from its visitors. One must decide what subject to study from a vast array, and then must show the determination of a true self-starter.

There is, for example, the graduate-level course “Topics in Philosophy of Language: Vagueness,” offered in the fall of 2005. The course promises “to give people a sense of what ‘accounting for vagueness’ is all about, why it’s hard, and why it’s important.” There is a reading list, a syllabus and a sample paper.

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While “Vagueness” is certainly on one end of the spectrum, there are relatively few courses that hold your hand. (A class on archery presents a litany of short clips showing how to hold a bow and arrow, and roughly 25 introductory courses, like Professor Agarwal’s on electrical engineering, have their lectures on videotape or audiotape.)

Anne Margulies, executive Director of OpenCourseWare, said that, “the best thing M.I.T. can do is share what we have here to those who can’t come here and hope others would do the same thing.” To that end, M.I.T. has been promoting a consortium of schools to expand the materials available here and around the world.

Mr. Chu is unabashed in his enthusiasm of his nonprofit project, with the sly name OOPS, for “OpenSource OpenCourseWare Prototype System,” at www.myoops.org. And he cites a lesson that he says he learned from Isaac Asimov’s “Foundation” series, a translation project that he has put on indefinite hold: “Knowledge can solve any problems — people choose bad leaders mostly because they don’t have enough knowledge.”

Correction: April 9, 2007

A headline in Business Day last Monday with an article about the translation of course materials at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology into Chinese misstated the location of the project. It is based in Taiwan, not mainland China.

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