

## MOOCs and Asian Studies



Anant Agarwal TED Talk 2014: Why MOOCs still matter. Source: YouTube at <https://tinyurl.com/y9ppuf2d>.

“Given that education has been calcified for 500 years, we really have to completely reimagine it. It’s like going from ox carts to the airplane.” This was the challenge laid out to a TED audience in January 2014 by Anant Agarwal, CEO of EdX. In his talk, Agarwal promised nothing less than to revolutionize education through MOOCs (or massively open online courses). By the end of the year, an article in the *MIT Technology Review* hit back, suggesting that “For all the hype, MOOCs are really just content—the latest iteration of the textbook. And just like a book on a library shelf, they can be useful to a curious passerby thumbing through a few pages—or they can be the centerpiece to a well-taught course. On their own, MOOCs are hardly more likely than textbooks to recreate a quality college education in all its dimensions.” Now, four years on, I hope to work through both the opportunities and limitations of MOOCs from the perspective of Asian studies educators.

### What Are MOOCs, and Where Can I Find Them?

The name “MOOC” is a good starting point for explaining how they work. MOOCs are *massive*, meaning they can be many times larger than the largest university lectures. They are *open*, meaning anyone can access their content for free. They are also *online*, though major providers now have apps for iOS and Android that allow prospective students to download content on the go when internet access is not available. They are *courses*, and much like traditional high school and university courses, they are broken down into units and lessons, with a particular content or skill explained, and then a student’s ability to comprehend or apply assessed. Unlike traditional courses, content is chiefly conveyed in video format, with readings sometimes offered as supplements. They mark an evolution from content accessed through iTunes U, YouTube, and the Great Courses in their inclusion of feedback, discussion forums, and a small but growing number of interactive activities.

The two main platforms home to Asian studies MOOCs are **Coursera** ([coursera.org](http://coursera.org)) and **EdX** ([edx.org](http://edx.org)). Both were founded in 2012, offer 1,000 to 2,000 courses, claim student enrollment in the tens of millions, and partner with colleges and universities for much of their content. While Coursera is run for-profit and EdX is nonprofit (it is a partnership of Harvard and Massachusetts Institute of Technology [MIT]), both are pursuing a sustainable revenue source by offering paid certificates and bonus content.

### Why Would an Asian Studies Educator Care about MOOCs?

MOOCs are powerful tools for expanding access and increasing engagement in the learning process. First, their reach is many times greater than

*Rather than lambasting phones or laptops as distractions, MOOCs demonstrate how young people’s interest in technology is something we can engage rather than fight.*

a typical university lecture course. MOOC enrollment is often measured in the thousands, with one of the largest—“Learning How to Learn” by University of San Diego and Coursera—even breaking the million mark. Whether down the street or across an ocean, students can access the course if they have an internet connection. Global reach means not just connecting with more students, but dramatically increases the viability of specialized courses, for example, on *kunqu* opera (p. 59). It also removes age constraints, making advanced courses more readily available to everyone from high school students to retirees. MOOCs are also flexible in terms of scheduling. Students do not have to be present in class at the same time and can complete their work at different paces. Personally, I even prefer archived courses that have already concluded, which allows the time pressure to evaporate entirely.

Second, MOOCs are a powerful counterargument to the technophobia of some well-intentioned educators. Rather than lambasting phones or laptops as distractions, MOOCs demonstrate how young people’s interest in technology is something we can engage rather than fight. At five to seven minutes, video presentations are broken down into shorter lengths than one might find in a typical university lecture. While still varied, production values of MOOC videos have, as a whole, improved considerably. Most students can expect to encounter audio and visual content from a range of sources that can better illustrate and amplify the message of the instructor, rather than simply seeing a talking head on screen. And after many lessons, students take short quizzes that evaluate comprehension of key points, which are more likely to reinforce understanding through the instant feedback available through the MOOC platform.

### What Are Their Limitations?

Neither high school nor college educators should worry about MOOCs replacing traditional schooling anytime soon. While access is one of the key selling points of MOOCs, it has also meant that dropout rates are staggering. EdX itself reported in 2016 that only 5.5 percent of those who register complete their courses. On one hand, this is discouraging news and reinforces the belief that there is no getting around the hard work of learning; on the other hand, this pattern also shows how easy it is to try out different offerings before committing to that hard work. Among those who stay, 80 percent already held bachelor degrees in 2015, according to *The Harvard Business Review*, meaning that at least at present, MOOCs are more likely to serve as a form of continuing education for the highly educated than a full-fledged alternative to the university system.

Perhaps more troubling is the varied experience for students. Like traditional courses, quality can vary considerably. Just because a course has been MOOC-ified does not mean it is necessarily more engaging than its real-world counterpart. Indeed, the absence of the physical presence of an instructor and other students might strip away important social dimensions of learning. Likewise, scalability can also lead to weakened feedback



In this image, the speaker is discussing the instructors in the program. Source: YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fn0i2v87woU>.

mechanisms. One colleague who was otherwise impressed with a MOOC she tried reported feeling frustrated by the weak quality of the discussion forums. Automated peer grading is improving with the help of artificial intelligence (AI), but still needs work. While it is a necessity to scale and may yet have potential, this is a hard problem to reliably crack, even for students who personally know one another and are invested in one another's learning.

#### Opportunities for Asia Studies Educators

In what scenarios might MOOCs be useful for Asian studies educators? How can they be integrated into our teaching and professional growth? Here, I have drawn two examples from personal experience and pointed to one path that has yet to be explored.

**Professional development**—Educators, like our students, enjoy learning most when we take ownership over the process. Three years ago, I was asked to start teaching a course on ancient Chinese history, an area in which I had limited training. It was exciting to delve into a selection of new books, though perhaps the best preparation came in the form of “ChinaX,” a MOOC taught by Peter Bol and William Kirby at Harvard. The course provided me tools I could use directly with students (the Chinese dynasties song <https://youtu.be/goHEGV6Ebrs> and the interactive ChinaX map <https://goo.gl/wTsgZs>, just to name two). It also modeled narratives and examples I could modify and build upon for my own teaching. This experience points to MOOCs as flexible platforms for expanding educator competencies outside their areas of direct specialization.

**Independent study**—In a similar vein, students are often driven to explore topics outside the direct expertise of their instructors. Adopting a MOOC as the backbone of an independent study for either a high school or university student can keep the learning experience focused while removing the strain on the instructor to organize content. This semester, a student and I are doing exactly that with Edward Slingerland's course, “Chinese Thought: Ancient Wisdom Meets Modern Science” (<https://goo.gl/vYXVyY>). With the use of the supplemental readings provided by Slingerland, a weekly one-on-one meeting, and short reflection essays, the course has provided an excellent learning opportunity for the student that might not have otherwise been available to him.

**Certificates**—One area that exists for other subjects but not yet for Asian studies are multicourse certificate programs. Coursera calls these “specializations” while EdX refers to them as “micromasters.” While not free, these certificate programs could be organized to offer college credit or perhaps paired with travel opportunities like those offered by the National Consortium for Teaching about Asia (NCTA). An Asia-themed certificate would be valuable both by setting out a case for relevance to a new audi-

*MOOCs are more likely to serve as a form of continuing education for the highly educated than a full-fledged alternative to the university system.*

ence and giving fresh thought to how we organize and present transnational, interdisciplinary content.

#### Highlighted Courses

Below, I have provided a sampling of the types of MOOCs currently available through Coursera and EdX. Since these change over time, the best way to see current and upcoming offerings is to search directly on their websites.

“**The Beauty of Kunqu Opera**” from Chinese University of Hong Kong and Coursera (<https://goo.gl/Pkj2tw>) is a seven-week course that uses stunning visuals to explore the history, aesthetics, and performance of one of the oldest forms of traditional Chinese opera. Available in Chinese with English subtitles.

“**Buddhism and Modern Psychology**” from Princeton University and Coursera (<https://goo.gl/Ubmnl1y>) asks the question “What happens when religion meets science?” Robert Wright from Princeton University aims to find out in this six-week course.

**ChinaX** from Harvard University and EdX (<https://goo.gl/337Vdw>) has evolved into a ten-part look at Chinese history, with parts one through five taught by Peter Bol as “China: Civilization and Empire” and parts six through ten taught by William Kirby as “China and the Modern World.”

“**Chinese Thought: Ancient Wisdom Meets Modern Science**” from The University of British Columbia and EdX (<https://goo.gl/vYXVyY>) is a two-part course that builds on Edward Slingerland's 2014 book *Trying Not to Try* and digs deep into the key elements of classical Chinese philosophy while providing fresh perspective with connections to social psychology.

“**The Importance of India**” from Ohio State University and Coursera (<https://goo.gl/6CET6u>) is a six-week introduction to India focusing on the themes of influence, diversity, complexity, creativity, and opportunity.

“**Jewish Diaspora in Modern China**” from Nanjing University and Coursera (<https://goo.gl/EApbzc>) is a cinematic look at Jewish history in China from the Tang Era (618–907) to the present.

“**The Search for Vernacular Architecture of Asia**” (<https://goo.gl/ogGYd2>) and “**Vernacular Architecture of Asia: Tradition, Modernity and Cultural Sustainability**” (<https://goo.gl/EoaBX6>) from University of Hong Kong and EdX are courses, each five weeks long, offering a transnational look at the built human environment in Asia.

“**Visualizing Japan (1850s–1930s): Westernization, Protest, Modernity**” (<https://goo.gl/SWWJGG>) from Harvard University, MIT, and EdX transforms the fascinating MIT's Visualizing Cultures (<https://goo.gl/jNY-B7x>) project into a four-module MOOC. ■

---

JARED HALL is an Instructor in History at the Hotchkiss School in Lakeville, Connecticut, where his elective courses explore themes related to China and the Asia-Pacific. Previously, he was based in Kunming and Beijing from 2006 to 2015, serving most recently as a Teacher and Administrator at Peking University High School–Dalton Academy. You can follow his work on his website, *Discovering History* ([www.discoveringhistory.org](http://www.discoveringhistory.org)), and on Twitter (@jaredhall).