

Comic-strip hero

Graduate student Jorge Cham decided to look on the bright side of his experiences and created a comic that is entertaining millions, writes **Jon Marcus**



Life as a graduate student can be stressful. It can be lonely, anxious and confidence-deflating, too... but it can also be funny.

That was the way Jorge Cham preferred to approach what he calls the “pain” of his first term of a masters programme in mechanical engineering at Stanford University – with humour. Cham created a comic strip for and about graduate students and their faculty advisers. Eleven years later, his comic strip boasts hundreds of thousands of readers, plus spin-off books, merchandise and lectures.

“It was a time when the last thing I should have been doing was drawing a comic. I was a teaching assistant, I was taking a full load of classes and trying to impress my professor. But there was an advertisement in the student paper looking for someone to draw a comic.”

Undergraduates usually supply American student newspapers with their comic strips. But Cham’s brother, who also attended graduate school to study engineering, said he had always thought there was a need for a comic strip looking at life for those pursuing higher degrees “because that’s when the real pain begins”, Cham recalls. His brother even suggested the strip’s name – *Piled Higher and Deeper*, or *PhD* for short. Cham later added the subtitle, “Life (or the lack thereof) in academia.”

Populated by overworked and under-appreciated graduate students, unmotivated undergraduates and absent-minded faculty, *PhD* is a world of grant deadlines, employment worries, political correctness and other sources of relentless angst that Cham says reflect his own experiences as he successfully studied for his masters and then a doctorate in mechanical engineering. Each of the characters, he says, “has a little bit of my multiple personalities in them”.

Some characters have more Cham in them than others. One, the Nameless Hero, is studying in Cham’s field of engineering, has spoken of becoming a cartoonist and has an

older brother who is an engineer, too. The N. H. also has a younger sister, Dee, an undergraduate who is preparing for her graduate-school entrance examination but who otherwise spends most of her time eating, napping and talking on her mobile phone.

The character Michael Slackenerny is a perpetual student who began working towards his graduate degree at some point in the 1980s. He lives off food provided free at campus events but has now finally reached the postdoctoral level.

One of Cham’s more popular creations is Cecilia, an engineering student to whom women readers particularly respond. Cham says his lectures draw a disproportionate number of women, despite their comparative rarity among the graduate-student ranks.

“You nailed down so well what it means to be an overachieving girl in a man’s world,” one female reader wrote to Cham. “You really deserve an honorary ‘Geek Girl’ title.” A male reader said that he likes Cecilia so much he wants to marry her.

The social sciences are represented by Tajel, an anthropology student, and the humanities by Gerard, who studies medieval Scandinavian cultural philosophy and who has appeared in the strip only twice during its run.

All the characters share a dry wit, a certain fatalism and ineffectively concealed fear.

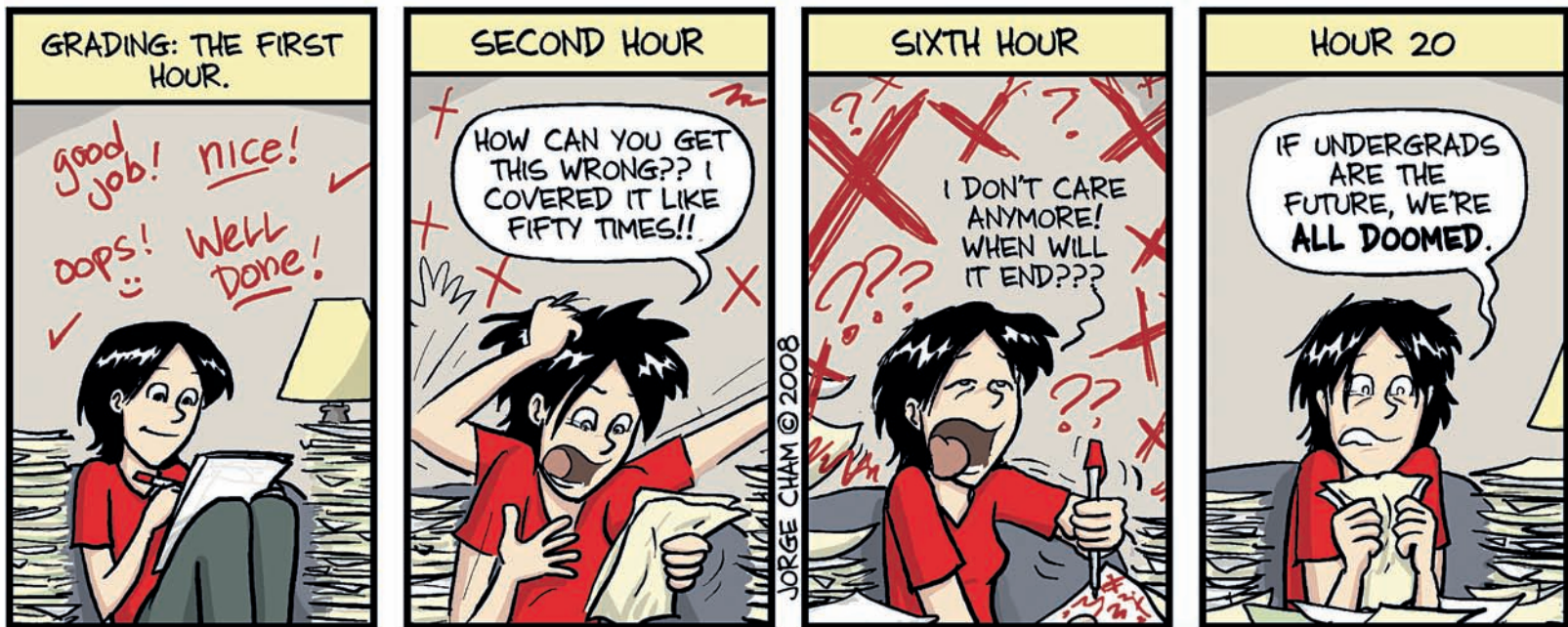
Academia, says Cham, is a relatively undisciplined environment, “so one of the main themes that comes up [in the comic] is procrastination.

“There’s a constant sense of guilt because there’s always more research you could be doing, more time [spent] in the lab.”

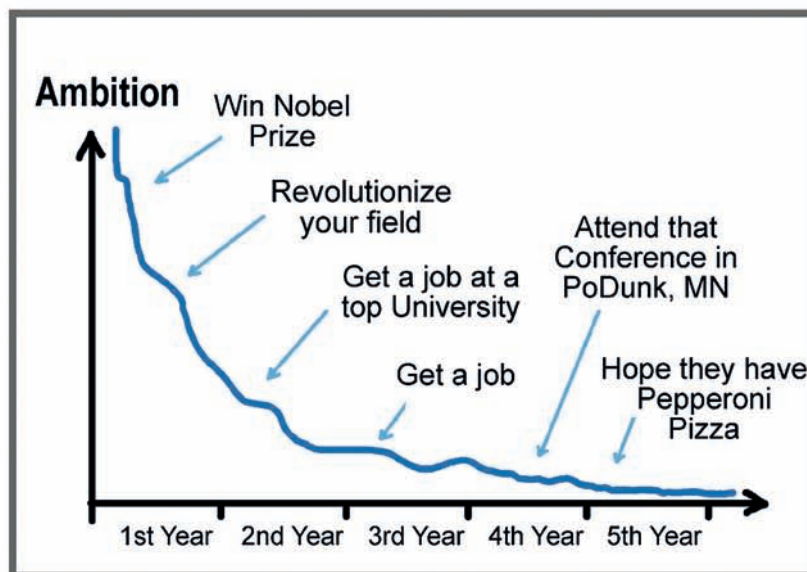
Many of *PhD*’s jokes seem funny only to people who live and work in higher education, such as references to “Einstein’s Special Theory of Research Inactivity”.

“And that’s the point,” Cham says. “But I try to also add another layer in the sense that

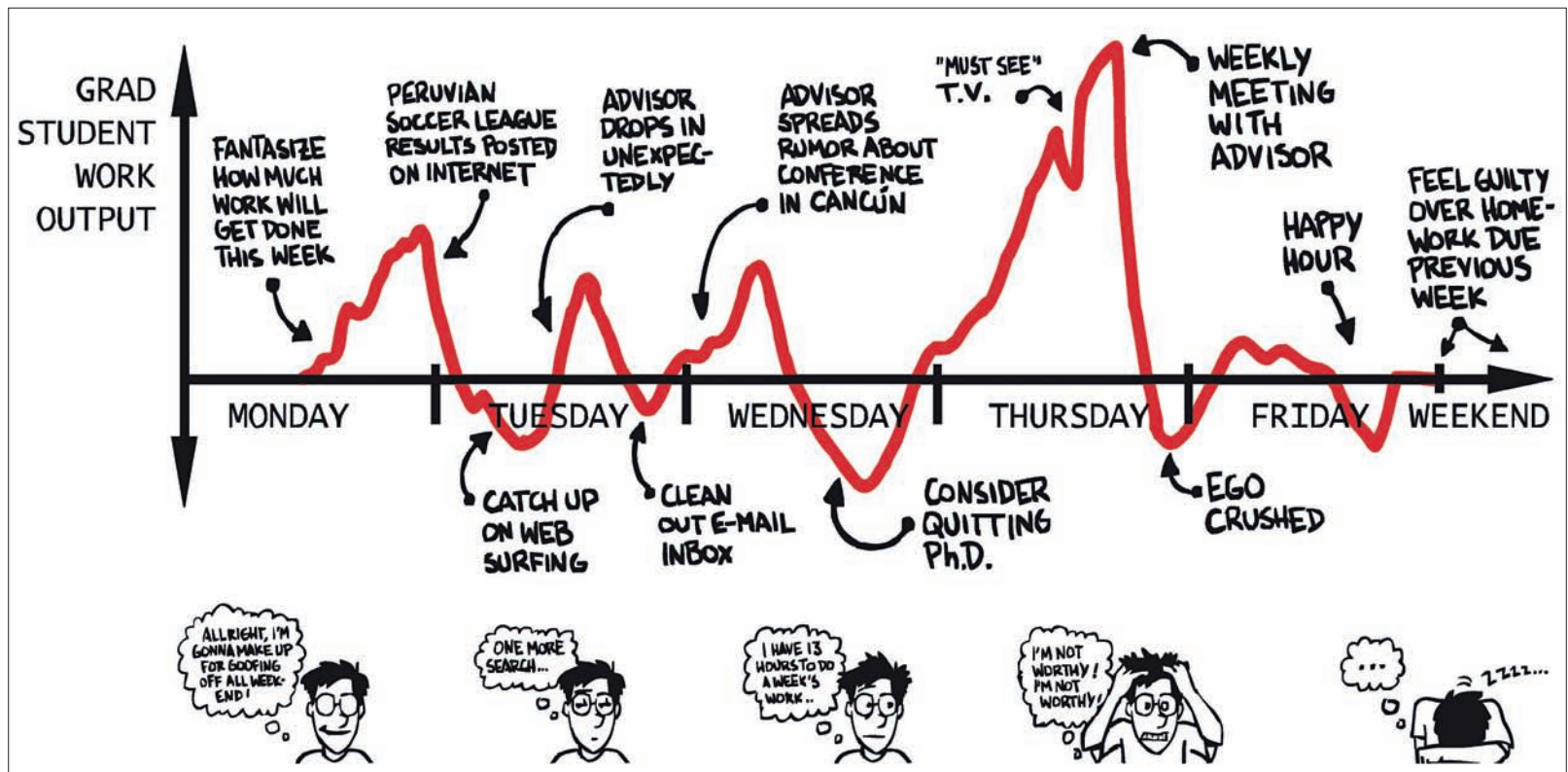
Cham's three books have sold 51,000 copies collectively and he has been invited to speak at 140 universities to date, including Cambridge



YOUR LIFE AMBITION - What Happened??



“The comic is a world of grant deadlines, employment worries, political correctness and other sources of relentless angst that Cham says reflect his own experiences”



at least some of the humour comes from the universality of the situations. What makes academia funny is the high aspirations people go into it with and the egos that develop. I think that's common to a lot of things in life.”

But the comic strip is primarily aimed at academics, something that wouldn't have been possible without the internet, Cham believes. Although it is now syndicated in student newspapers at universities including Stanford, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Carnegie Mellon University and the California Institute of Technology, his work is most widely seen on his website, www.phdcomics.com, which attracts more than 600,000 unique visitors a month.

The site is free. Cham, who is 32 and lives in southern California, also lets student papers print *PhD* without charge. He makes his money from sales of T-shirts, coffee mugs, calendars and three self-published books (one entitled *Life is Tough and Then You Graduate*), and by lecturing about the graduate student experience at universities in the US and Europe.

If there is a serious side to *PhD*, it's that the comic reflects a sense of the alienation some graduate students feel.

“That's probably the most common feedback I get from students, by email and when I get out and do these lectures,” Cham says, “the sense that graduate students say they feel less alone [after reading the comic]. The doctoral process is such an isolating experience.

“They feel like they're the only ones having

these difficulties with their advisers or their funding agencies, that they're lost or they don't really know what they're doing with their lives. That's why I think the comic is popular, because they see that there are other people out there like them.”

Cham's doctoral degree is also from Stanford, where he focused on robots and brain-machine interfaces. He co-authored such papers as “Hexapedal Robots via Shape Deposition Manufacturing” and “Semi-Chronic Motorized Microdrive and Control Algorithm for Autonomously Isolating and Maintaining Optimal Extracellular Action Potentials”, before teaching at CalTech from 2003 to 2005. But now he works on the comic strip full time, drawing it directly on a computer using a graphics tablet.

Some of Cham's hard-earned academic skills come into play in his art, he says.

“Part of my research was in design – how engineers come up with ideas and select the best ones. A little bit of that creative thinking comes into play, but mostly you learn a lot of

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broad skills in terms of thinking analytically about things.”

University faculty are portrayed in Cham's strips as generally affable, self-absorbed types. There's the forgetful Professor Smith, for instance, who takes credit for his doctoral students' research and tries unsuccessfully to seem hip, and Professor Jones, whose advice is fairly useless.

“There's no implied criticism,” Cham says. “[The characters are] never mean-spirited or out to be hurtful. They're really trying to get their job done. And one thing that has been made clear to me is that being a grad student is tough but being a professor is even worse. They have very high expectations on them, too.”

Cham's own PhD adviser at Stanford, Mark Cutkosky, says he is more or less a fan. “There are times when it is very funny and a quite accurate portrayal of postgraduate academic life,” says Cutkosky, who reads the strip often.

Cham says he plans to continue for as long as he can. “I'll do it until I can't do it any more. Or, more specifically, until nobody wants to read it.”

There seems no imminent danger of that. Cham's three books have sold 51,000 copies collectively and he has been invited to speak at 140 higher education institutions to date, including the University of Cambridge.

With 1.7 million graduate students studying at American universities alone, and a few hundred thousand more starting each autumn, Cham figures he has a market that is as enduring as it is stressed out. ●