

LI XU INTERVIEWS TAN SOR- HOON

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Dr. Sor-hoon Tan serves as Academic Director of the Politics, Law, and Economics (PLE) major at Singapore Management University. Her research focuses on John Dewey's pragmatism, Confucianism, Chinese political thought, and democratic theory. She specializes in comparative philosophy, political philosophy and political theory. She is the author of *Confucian Democracy--A Deweyan Reconstruction of Confucianism* (2004), as well as the editor of *Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Chinese Philosophy Methodologies* (2016), *Challenging Citizenship: Group Membership and Cultural Identity in a Global Age* (2005).

Li Xu conducted this interview by email with Dr. Tan on behalf of *Dewey Studies* in December 2018. Li Xu is a Ph.D. in philosophy and her work focuses on Dewey studies, aesthetics, and art education.

Neither Xu's questions nor Tan's response have been edited in any way.



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Q: Why did you decide to study in Hawaii? Was Roger Ames your thesis director? Did you go to Hawaii specifically to study with him? Can you sum up in just a few sentences what unique lessons you learned from him? Who else did you interact with there?

Colleagues at the National University of Singapore, which offered me a scholarship to pursue doctoral studies in comparative philosophy, suggested that I apply to the University of Hawaii. Before my arrival in Hawaii, I was more familiar with the works of Tu Wei-ming and Ted de Bary, but I wanted to do my PhD in a philosophy department. I had not read any of Roger's writings previously, but signed up for his graduate seminar on Daoism in my first semester at UH. My reasoning was to challenge myself by plunging in at the deep end, to see if I could really do Chinese and comparative philosophy. To someone whose basic philosophical training had been analytic, Daoism made little sense philosophically. It was hard initially, even though Roger was a very encouraging teacher. It took me almost half the semester before I "saw the light" – in other words, achieved the paradigm shift that enabled me to make philosophical sense of Daoist texts. I enjoyed the class and learned so much from it that I asked Roger to be my thesis supervisor at the end of that first semester at UH.

Roger's love for Chinese philosophy is infectious, and what I learned from him will take too much time to even list in an interview. The most valuable among them I would say is respect for the texts and philosophies one is trying to understand, meticulous care in carrying out one's investigations, and a combination of daring questioning and intellectual humility. Besides his excellent scholarship, Roger is also an exemplary mentor. I have tried to emulate him as a teacher, and in ways of conducting oneself in relation to others – while still a long way from his level of excellence, I hope the attempt has made me a better person.

Others on my dissertation committee include Mary Tiles, Jim Tiles, and Ken Kipnis. They all helped to stimulate my thinking and subjected my efforts to rigorously questioning from different

perspectives and traditions. The learning environment at UH is in my view an excellent one for doing cross cultural comparative philosophy. I did not read classical Chinese before going to UH, and I have David McCraw to thank for giving me a sound knowledge of classical Chinese. He was a genius at finding fascinating texts from a wide range of genres for translation practice, and I had great fun in those classes.

Q: Had you studied Dewey before you came to Hawaii? How did you find your way to Dewey? What was it about Dewey that attracted your interest?

I had not read any of Dewey's works before going to Hawaii. However, I had been an admirer of Hu Shih, Dewey's famous student, for his role in the New Culture movement, as I was very much into May Fourth literature as a teenager. During my undergraduate years, Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* was one of my favorite books, although I did not appreciate the significance of that preference until later. Sad to say, I never looked up the connections with Dewey, and in a totally unthinking manner, shared some of the misunderstandings and prejudices against Pragmatism common among analytic philosophers, although the butt of analytic jokes and contempt among my Oxbridge contemporaries was James rather than Dewey.

In my first semester at UH, Professor Joseph Grange was visiting UH, and offered a graduate seminar on John Dewey's philosophy. The course outline seemed interesting. I was totally captivated once I started reading *Democracy and Education* and the collection of Dewey's political philosophy writings, which were required for that seminar. The term paper I wrote for this seminar became one of my first publications. I changed my intended topic of research from a comparison of the philosophies of Aristotle and Confucius to a comparison of Dewey's Pragmatism and early Confucianism. I have never regretted my choice, although I maintain a keen interest in Aristotle. After that first semester, Jim Tiles nurtured my interest in Dewey and deepened my interest in Pragmatist philosophy.

Fortuitously, I discovered that Roger himself had a major interest in Dewey, although I felt rather ambiguous about my topic when I

realized that he had a book comparing Confucius and Dewey (*Democracy of the Dead*) coming out. I was prepared to change my topic, worried that I might not have anything different to say. He was kind enough to let me read the manuscript, which reassured me that I could and would write a thesis with original contribution to the comparison between Dewey's Pragmatism and Confucianism different from that book.

I find Dewey's approach to philosophy, treating it as a tool to solve problems in the real world, the most attractive aspect of his thought. I came to share many of his critical views about traditional Anglo-Saxon philosophy. Indeed, he helped me understand why I was dissatisfied with my philosophical education in Oxford, when previously I only had vague misgivings that I could not really articulate as an undergraduate – I had always thought the problem was entirely with my own inadequacies. His emphasis on the importance of education and its relation to philosophy is also something that fits my own outlook and interest. And, more specifically, his conception of democracy offers me the best tool for the task I have set for myself: a reconstruction of Confucianism so that those who inherited a Confucian legacy today need not choose between their cultural heritage and democracy, but could try to combine the two.

Q: Your book Confucian Democracy got great reviews. Has that opened new opportunities for you or new conversations about democracy in China and elsewhere?

I am glad that the book is still read and cited after more than a decade. I have been working on issues related to the book over the years, besides Confucian democracy. Specifically, I have been invited to contribute to conferences and publication projects on Chinese political philosophy, Confucianism, as well as Pragmatism in China, and Pragmatism-Chinese philosophy comparisons. It has put me in touch with other scholars working on similar topics, from whom I have learned a great deal, and continue to learn.

Q: Do Dewey's ideas still have influence in contemporary China and the East Asian region?

It is not “flavor of the month” – but popularity is not the best measure of influence. In academia, Dewey is still among the more well known of Western philosophers. I believe the interest is increasing, and Chinese scholarship on Dewey will receive a great boost from the recent publication of the Chinese translation of Dewey’s *Complete Works*. The publisher will also be publishing shorter collections on specific areas of interest within Dewey’s works, with substantive introductions from Chinese scholars of Dewey. This will make Dewey’s philosophical works more accessible.

Dewey’s influence might be stronger in Chinese education than in the specialized discipline of philosophy, even though putting his ideas into practice has also met with many problems in that area.

Although I would not go so far as deny the presence of metaphysical interests and discussions in Chinese thought, I believe that there is a stronger practical orientation that makes Pragmatism relatively more appealing within Chinese culture, and other societies with Confucian influence. Ironically, this might make Dewey’s philosophy seem too obviously true and therefore from certain academic perspectives not challenging and interesting enough.

Q: What is going on in philosophy in Singapore? Are pragmatism and Dewey hot topics there?

There are two philosophy departments in Singapore, one at the National University of Singapore and another at the Nanyang Technological University. A few philosophers also work in the School of Social Sciences at the Singapore Management University. The majority are trained in departments in the UK, US, or Australia, with analytic philosophy interests and approaches. There are only a few of us working on Chinese philosophy, comparative philosophy, and continental philosophy. I do not know of any other philosophers with a strong interest in Dewey among my Singapore colleagues, except a

young scholar working on music education in the Institute of Education at the Nanyang Technological University.

Q: What is your vision of future scholarly relations between Western and the Eastern countries?

The potential for more and better mutual learning is there, but unfortunately there are many obstacles posed by the way universities and departments are organized, and the way academic research, especially in the humanities, is structured.

Q: What is your currently working on in philosophy? What do you hope to accomplish in your new role at Singapore Management University?

I am working on a book about the relevance of Dewey's pragmatism to China's democratization, and various shorter projects such as global justice from a Confucian perspective and Confucian feminism.

I joined SMU because I believe it offers me a chance to contribute to tertiary education in Singapore beyond the teaching of a few specialized philosophy courses every year. I hope to make philosophy relevant to the education SMU offers its undergraduates in ways that would help them become more effective and fulfilled in their careers and personal lives.