

## *A Short Conversation with Professor Leo Ou-fan Lee on the State of the Humanities in Hong Kong*

Michael O'Sullivan, with Leo Ou-fan Lee

### **Background and Biography**

Professor Leo Ou-fan Lee was born in Henan Province in 1942 and was brought up in Taiwan, graduating from National Taiwan University with a degree in Foreign Languages. He went on to study at the University of Chicago, and then at the University of Harvard, where he received his doctoral degree in history and East Asian languages. He has since taught at numerous universities, including Princeton, Chicago and Harvard, from which he retired from teaching and moved to Hong Kong to become Sin Wai Kin Professor of Chinese Culture at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. A long-term Hong Kong resident, he has been an active participant in the Hong Kong cultural scene, having published in the past decades nearly 20 books of cultural criticism in both Chinese and English, including (in English) *City Between Worlds: My Hong Kong* (Harvard University Press, 2008). Among his scholarly books are *The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers* (Harvard University Press, 1973) and *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930–1945* (Harvard University Press, 1999). He was elected Fellow of Academia Sinica in 2002. In addition to literature, his other humanistic interests include classical music, film, and architecture.

This conversation was recorded at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in early 2018 for a project on the humanities. Professor Lee has written broadly—as our conversation describes—on cross-disciplinary aspects of the humanities over five decades, and some of his recent books in Chinese (not yet translated into English) have been specifically on the humanities. Professor Lee sees it as his ethical responsibility to share his ideas on the humanities with other scholars and with the public, and to challenge what he believes is an overly reductive perspective on education and on learning being disseminated in Hong Kong. At a time of crisis in Hong Kong, when Hong Kong's universities are being attacked and when many have been slow to come to defence of the universities, it is important to reflect on the idea of humanistic learning that Professor Lee describes in this conversation and that he believes is still of great importance for young people in Hong Kong.

## The Conversation

### Michael O’Sullivan (MOS)

I am delighted to be able to ask you a few questions on the humanities today. Perhaps I can begin by asking you what is your understanding of what the humanities are?

### Leo Ou-fan Lee (LL)

First of all, the humanities means, for myself, learning about life and learning how to be a good person. In my old age today I still feel that I am learning. I live and learn in the humanities. The humanities surrounds me. Secondly, it is cross-disciplinary; that is to say, it is in the plural. I feel that I am not a specialist in any discipline. If I am a specialist in Modern Chinese literature, that is because I am forced to be so. Of course, I am interested in Chinese literature, but then to be a humanist, whether in China or in Europe, you have to be interested in more than one subject, because being a human means so many things to different people. This is where it gets more complicated, but I believe we humanists all have a general consensus that to be a humanist is to be cross-disciplinary, even though such cross-disciplinarity is under challenge, under siege.

### MOS

We would share that as well. And what value or values do the humanities have in Hong Kong?

### LL

Well we have the primary sense and the secondary sense. I’ll begin with the secondary sense, namely the humanities as an academic discipline.<sup>1</sup> Recently, I read a Chinese article, which is apparently the transcript of a speech given by Professor [Simon] Ho, Vice-Chancellor of the Hang Seng University of Hong Kong, published in the recent issue of *Ming Pao Monthly* [March 2018 issue]. I agree fully with what he said. The newest policy in Hong Kong is to promote the so-called STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics] scheme. As a Vice-Chancellor, Professor Ho said, no, that is wrong; we should oppose that, or at least supplement that, with what he called the humanities, by which he meant, very simply, the ability to read, to write, and to communicate—and I would add a fourth one—to learn how to be human. For me it has always been like this. I am not opposed to STEM per se but I just feel that STEM is not a goal, but a career, or a career pattern. It is practical, for a short-term “outcome.” The humanities has no visible outcome, but it is so life-affirming and fulfilling for me. That is why the older I become, the more

---

<sup>1</sup> This is different from a more general sense of the humanities that Professor Lee will later relate to a general sense of “cultivation.”

I feel I have so much to learn. People say I am being modest—it's not; it's being human. But I don't know how to explain this to the management in Hong Kong. It is such a simple rule, but somehow they could never get it, because they would say: show us the result, and use statistics, charts or rankings—and I'm opposed to all these. But they will say what you and I have said makes no sense because it cannot be seen or realized. I think that is the deficiency. Professor Ho considered this to be a lack of vision, and I think he is right. We have all these consultations and planning, but they are all short term. The vision cannot be bought right away. It has to be nourished. To nourish the vision means you have to have humanities in two senses of the word.

### **MOS**

You said here you can't see the result but you can feel it. I'm reminded of the expression "by my works you will know me." Is there anything you think you can see from the works of humanists like you and me that could be a form of something visible?

### **LL**

Using myself as an example: there is this Chinese term, *qizhi* (氣質), or *suyang* (素養), namely temperament and cultivation. As you steep yourself in the humanities for years and years you cannot see for yourself, but people say that as I grow old I seem to have accumulated a state of cultivation—it's a natural growth, nothing contrived; it is visible on the basis of people's communication. I will give you one concrete example, in case a management person is listening to this. Again, Professor Ho's speech points out that some of the top management look for temperament and cultivation when hiring people. They don't only look at your background, otherwise, why even do interviews? They can also see your state of cultivation when you write your job application letter to say why you want the job, because your temperament can come through from the letter. I can give you numerous examples of how the top management always looks for people with vision and cultivation. This is true even in China; for example I talked to a tycoon of construction, and he said the top layer of employees in his company society are all from the Chinese literature department, and the management graduates are the mid-ranking layer, because when you get to the top level of planning you need people with vision. How can you explain this? I try to explain this in simplest terms to the Hong Kong management including the government, but they don't get it.

### **MOS**

But at least they do come and talk to you?

**LL**

They never come and talk to me, because they know my stance. If they talk to me, they will put me in an uncomfortable position. They will say: let's do this, let's do that. The whole thing will turn into a formalistic management meeting, so I just gave up. My own personal stance now is to try to do the best I can, to open up new spaces, new channels of communication. For instance, I consider the opportunity to be interviewed by you here today a responsibility for me. Ethically, I cannot say no to this interview on the value of humanities, no matter how busy I am. So I grab these chances, but I don't go out and talk to the management anymore.

**MOS**

I'll move on to the next question which is, where lies the value of pursuing higher education in the humanities in Hong Kong? We are thinking of young people in Hong Kong here.

**LL**

Well, the value of the humanities lies in the educational growth of a human being. Over here, researchers in education use a lot of experimental psychology to monitor all these aspects of a child's growth from kindergarten and all the way up. We hear so many horror stories: even before a child is born we are registering him or her in kindergarten and all that. Every parent wants a good education for their child. But what is a good education? Herein lies the value. The humanities form the core of a good education from kindergarten upwards. In a way I have a kind of hunch. I have students whose children are now going to kindergarten. The kindergartens are not doing a bad job actually: they play with their children, they try to encourage their creativity, and they don't enforce discipline. Gradually, of course, after kindergarten, our learning becomes more regimented. Even for my courses at university, I have auditors, but many students cannot take them for two reasons. One reason is they think my reading list is too heavy, but the other crucial reason is that my courses don't belong to any department or study scheme. There are only so many slots you can take.

So in a way the value of the humanities lies ironically in something invisible, for instance, the student-teacher relationship outside the classroom or between classes. My personal memory always stems from a few good teachers in high school. Gradually, you learn from these teachers and try to emulate them, and then learn to be on your own. These relationships are the things the Hong Kong government does not trust anymore, because they will say you need figures to prove them. The value of the humanities lies in spaces within the current bureaucratic structure. The humanities is like air or nourishment: it gets into the human body and its effects do not show right away, but gradually you

become healthy. So I am trying to find those intangible things that are also easy to explain to people—I am not doing anything abstract.

I no longer trust curriculum reform, and this is something I feel very sad about. Look at high schools in Hong Kong. When you talk about curriculum reform in Hong Kong, there is no compromise, and schools have to do it. But even if the high schools agree to do the minimum, frankly do you have the good teachers to do that? My experience with Hong Kong high school teachers is that they are under a lot of pressure. They don't have the space or the time to have what is called self-enhanced learning.

So what can we do? The university provides the last opportunity. I always feel that we should not specify departments or majors for our students' first two years in university. Then, in the junior year, students can decide on their specialism. You couldn't enjoy this choice before, but now it is possible. If they want to do business, they enroll in the business school, and then they can specialise in finance or marketing. But of course, for me, the business does not belong to an undergraduate education. But of course this is heresy!

One crucial part of my personal experience was at the University of Chicago where I taught for eight years. While I was there in the 80s, the undergraduate education was very different; it has changed now, I'm told. The way they did it basically was, for the first year, Plato and all the "Great Books," and then the second year, students all knew Weber. I taught Weber here, but if you ask the students, they've never heard of him.

Of course, in the States now the humanities is under attack for the wrong reasons, namely political correctness and all that.

### **MOS**

You talked about these spaces and personal contacts between student and teacher. Didn't you meet [the philosopher] Isaiah Berlin briefly? That in itself must really stay with you. He must have influenced how you think about the humanities?

### **LL**

Just for an hour or so. Of course, he was a great talker. I heard him lecture several times, and I also went to New York City to consult him about my dissertation on the romantic generation of modern Chinese writers. He started talking about the Cultural Revolution in the late 60s and early 70s, and he used a very strange comparison, comparing the people in the Revolution with the European romantics. I was too young to comprehend him then, but that's the way his mind worked. A chance meeting with a great master always makes a great impression on me. I have also just been to New Zealand to visit [the Sinologist] John Minford for a very interesting creative experience. It was not a conference, but an event for people to get together and talk about texts and translation for seven days.

We wandered, we walked, we watched performances, and we also listened to Kunqu opera. He used the French word “*formation*,” or “cultivation” in English, and said we need to cultivate ourselves. That’s the kind of idea, but you cannot have it in Hong Kong.

**MOS**

How have the humanities influenced how you understand your life in general?

**LL**

Everything. As I wrote in my Chinese articles, I faced a crucial decision under a lot of pressure in Taiwan when I graduated from high school. It’s the same here: the best students will go to medicine, the second best will go to law or professional schools, the third best to the sciences, and the last to the humanities. I was interested in music because of my family background (my parents were musicians), and I asked my parents whether I could study music, say, conducting in Vienna. But my father said, “Are you kidding? You will have no job. When you come back to Taiwan there is nothing for you. No way. You do something else.” Because of that, I finally settled for Western literature because Chinese literature was looked down upon in Taiwan. I now regret it. If I had known more Classical Chinese literature I would have expanded my breadth a little bit. I am now studying classical poetry in order to lecture on a modern painter and compare him to a Japanese painter. This is what we do in the humanities—one thing leading to another.

But your question asked me how the humanities influenced me. After I made the choice to study Western literature, the humanities have influenced me all the way. I tried to turn back the clock and went to the States to study, with the wrong belief that—speaking good English—I could become a diplomat. So I got into the University of Chicago studying International Relations, wanting to work in diplomacy. Within a year I became disillusioned, for the simple reason that in those years, the study of International Relations was a study of game theory. The theoretical model was game theory: security factors, major players, minor players; international organizations like the UN versus the nation states. Everything was in the abstract. But the crux of the whole argument is power, and I have total distaste for power. So finally I said, no way, I just had to leave, and I applied desperately to Harvard to study Chinese history. I was lucky I got in—nowadays I wouldn’t have a chance, but back then I got in on the strength of a recommendation letter from a librarian, a famous Sinologist in the University of Chicago. Ever since then there was no turning back, I have stayed within the general humanities stream. I moved from history to literature, and now I’m going back to history. The sky is the limit for me. Maybe I’m a particular case. I was never trained in any specialty. My undergraduate training was in Western literature; back in those days the first two years were spent studying the

English language, and only in my third and fourth year did I read a couple of Shakespeare texts and some novels.

**MOS**

And finally, what is your opinion of the education policy in regard to the humanities in Hong Kong?

**LL**

My imaginary listener or reader will be the university management. The answer lies not in tangible charts that say how many people from the English Department graduate with degrees, get top jobs, this and that—that's how they calculate whether you succeed or not. I have given up on this; I have given so many interviews against rankings—I say you'd become slaves to a few ranking companies. But even then, they should give some respect to certain intangible factors. For example, if Isaiah Berlin had been born in the States, would he have become the Isaiah Berlin we know? The answer is no. He had to be a product of Oxford. It's the environment, and that kind of environment is not a prestige. It's very sad. Here's an idea I gave up on recently. Why not some private colleges, so that Hong Kong students have a choice? Then I had to give up on this idea because a while back [around 2010–2011], some Jesuit priests in fact had a plan to establish a Jesuit college in Hong Kong like the University of Notre Dame in USA. I told them if they were successful I would teach for them for free. They submitted a plan and negotiated with the government. They did everything they could, but the government threw one hurdle after another. In the end, the government said there's no land available for you—we have no land to lease—and just cut it. This idea even had support at the highest administrative committees, and there were people who supported it, but somehow it didn't work. After that I gave up. My next effort would be to encourage my students to find your own spaces: establish your own informal groups for whatever lengths of time in whatever format, so long as you don't become a slave to the rigid bureaucratic structure. That's basically my bottom line. Even then students complain: they say they don't have time. I say: if you are interested, you will find the time. You can see I've been very concrete; I don't want to talk in theory!

**MOS**

That's a brilliant response. Thank you very much for your time today.