



In Conversation with Dr. Raymond Lee

Interview by Yeoh Seng Guan

Dr Raymond Lee was born in Malaysia more than 6 decades ago. He studied in Malaysia, Australia and the USA. He was Lecturer and Associate Professor in sociology at the University of Malaya for 26 years before retiring in 2005. His primary research interests have been on ethnicity, religion and modernity in Malaysia. Dr Lee is still active in writing, mainly on issues pertaining to modernity, consciousness and mortality.

Yeoh Seng Guan (YSG): Tell us a bit about your educational and working backgrounds – where and what you studied and where you worked?

Raymond Lee (RL): My first degree was in psychology, which I obtained from Macquarie University in Australia. I returned to Malaysia in 1973 and did an MA in sociology at the University of Malaya. I wanted to apply some ideas on the contact hypothesis, which was then an appealing concept, to race relations in Malaysia. The outcome was an empirical study on the lack of contact in Malaysian race relations. After I finished my MA, I went to the University of Massachusetts to do my Ph.D. In 1979, I joined the department of anthropology and sociology at the University of Malaya where I remained until my retirement in 2005.

YSG: Why did you choose to do your Ph.D. studies in the USA? What did you research and write for your Ph.D.? How did this influence your research interests and trajectory in the years ahead?

RL: I went to the University of Massachusetts to work on collective behaviour, a field of American sociology

dealing with group beliefs, perceptions and influences. I discovered that collective behaviour was being re-worked under the label symbolic interaction. Together with phenomenology and ethnomethodology, it formed a theoretical challenge to the assumptions of structural and functional sociology. Looking back, it seemed like it was a prelude to postmodernism. My dissertation topic was mass hysteria but I ended up studying spirit possession in Malaysia. I found myself straddling the constructivism of interactionist sociology and the symbolic concerns of cultural anthropology. The result was something like a fusion dish but it seemed palatable to my dissertation committee. In doing this research, I was puzzled by the persistence of certain cultural beliefs despite increasing rationality in the form of modernisation. This question has continued to inform my current research.

YSG: What was the intellectual climate like then in Malaysia in comparison to the USA? What were the intellectual ideas that seemed important to you then and why?

RL: In the early 1970s, Malaysian sociology was in its infancy. Despite the lack of a clear-cut identity, one could say that it was influenced by the focus on the meaning of development in relation to class, culture, race and government. Sociology students and researchers were highly sensitive to the power issues of that period. They were quite outspoken and didn't hesitate to debate on those issues. However, indifference set in after the 1970s. I can't say much about the U.S. because I spent only a short time there. It seemed to me that just having wound down the Vietnam War,

the U.S. at that time was more concerned about a wide range of domestic issues such as busing, gun laws and homelessness. The theoretical debate at that time was on post-Parsonian sociology, a new type of subjectivism that addressed the definitions and negotiability of situations – something that is now called agency. This type of debate was quite alien to sociology students in Malaysia because it didn't ring any bells for people grappling with questions about post-colonial development. I tried to teach these theoretical ideas but it made little sense to my students. For me, these ideas formed a vital component in the body of thinking that was later addressed as postmodernism. Although post-modernism seems to have come and gone, its impact has not been rendered insignificant as can be seen in the current debates on liquidity and individualisation.

YSG: Who are the theorists that have continued to frame your intellectual and research questions and why?

RL: Frankly speaking, I can't claim to have been profoundly influenced by one particular theorist throughout my career. I think most of us are intellectual nomads, moving from one set of ideas, maybe feeling a bit disillusioned, to another and so forth. But if I were asked to be more definite, I would say Max Weber. As an undergraduate, I flirted with Weber's idea of charisma when I wrote my honors thesis. There was a brief revival of Weberian sociology in the 1980s, which attracted my attention – especially the question of modernity and rationality in Asia as the Western world grappled with postmodernism. I tried to deal with that question in a long article in *Current Sociology* (1994). At that time, I was also intrigued by some of Jean Baudrillard's work, which seemed to parallel Weber's and I wrote an article on it in *Economy & Society* (1994).

Both theorists were confronting the modern heart of darkness, one epitomising it as the engine of rationality and the other as seduction by simulacra. I found their problematic relevant to the meaning of development in Malaysia. A little later Zygmunt Bauman came up with the idea of liquid modernity,

which seemed to be continuous with the effort to unravel the promises of the modern age. I tried to connect the relevance of this idea to development in Malaysia in an article in *Thesis Eleven* (2005). Each theorist in his own inimitable way was writing about the irrationality of rationality. Probably, the significance of their metaphors – the iron cage (Weber), transparency of evil (Baudrillard) and liquid life (Bauman) – has informed the way I framed my thinking on modernity and modernisation.

YSG: Both you and Susan Ackerman are well known as sociologists of religion of/in Malaysia. Tell us a bit about the background to and findings of *Heaven in Transition*, which was first published in 1988. How do you think it was received by other scholars? If you were given a chance to rewrite it, what would you have done differently?

RL: As explained in the preface, this book was a result of serendipitous research. Initially, we were investigating cases of mass spirit possession in offices, factories, schools and other public places. This phenomenon was widely reported in the Malaysian media in the 1970s and typically involved Malay factory workers, schoolgirls and college students experiencing different levels of interpersonal conflict. Some results of this research were published in *Psychiatry* (1980) and *American Ethnologist* (1981). But what was strikingly similar to all these social dramas was the reference to the language of religion and power. Interpretations of possession were generally framed as a type of spiritual struggle in the face of religious violations and a search for religious cures. This observation helped us to discover forms of ritualised possession connected to new religious movements that had emerged among the Buddhists, Christians and Hindus. We found many enthusiastic informants who wanted to share with us their newfound experiences in those movements. Looking back, I would say we had many lucky breaks as researchers in the late 1970s when the religious mood was quite conducive to our exploratory endeavors. I can't say whether this mood can be replicated today, given the increasingly sensitive nature of religious issues. As one can discern from the data

presented in the book, we were able to cross religious boundaries to report on these movements with little difficulty.

I don't think the book attracted wide local interest when it was first published in 1988. Abroad, it was generally well received by anthropologists and sociologists of Asian religions. I believe the Malaysian public became more aware of the book when it was republished as a local paperback in 1990. Alas, some of this attention was not something we sought. Unbeknown to us, members of one of the movements we researched got wind of the book and bought a copy. They attempted to file a suit against us because they claimed we had defamed the reputation of their leader. After a couple of weeks of legal cat-and-mouse, we succumbed to their demand for a statement of apology. In retrospect, I would say that we were caught off-guard in taking for granted the writer's privilege. The question of writing about and writing for others needs to be rethought. Naturally, if given a chance to rewrite the book we would definitely write with greater caution in the face of a better informed, hyper-connected and hyper-sensitive public. But I don't imagine that this question matters now because we wrote a second book with this unpleasant experience as a guide.

YSG: What was *Sacred Tensions* book project about in relation to *Heaven in Transition*?

This book was a follow-up to fill a theoretical gap and to update our observations on religious developments in Malaysia. The first book was heavy on ethnography but thin on theory. The implicit theorising in the first book left us open to criticisms of misplaced conceptual thinking, particularly on the issues of secularisation, rationalisation and modernisation. I felt that organising the book within a Weberian paradigm might offer a more substantive treatment of some of these issues. One of the manuscript reviewers also suggested theoretical elaboration along Weberian lines. Naturally, it's impossible to please everyone. Sociologists of religion with a Weberian outlook had no problems identifying with our work, especially our effort to compare the practice of four world religions within

the space of a single society. On the other hand, some anthropologists were disappointed with the heavy Weberian approach and the limited attention given to the presentation of new data. After our experiences with litigious religionists, we became even more discriminating in introducing new materials into our book. We gave priority to our peace of mind than to ethnographic effulgence. As a result, the book was slim on ethnography and perhaps overbearing in theory. In a way, I feel we accomplished more in this book than the first one because of our attempt to re-focus the data in order to argue for a nuanced interpretation of secularisation and modernisation rather than for an outright rejection of the secularisation thesis.

YSG: You have also written several single authored books and important journal articles apart from *Heaven in Transition* and *Sacred Tensions*. Tell us a bit about them.

RL: Following *Sacred Tensions*, we wrote *The Challenge of Religion after Modernity* (2002). This book was not centered on Malaysian religions but on the re-enchantment thesis as the hidden companion of secularisation. It was largely a theoretical work dealing with the changing religious landscape in a globalised world that is becoming both secular and supernaturalistic. I don't think it's easy developing this type of argument because most readers want an uncomplicated answer: are we secularised or not? Instead of portraying the world as being de- or re-secularised, I'm trying to reinterpret the disenchantment with godly powers as a re-enchantment of the self. We're talking here about individualised spiritualities – the type of argument that is being advanced by Paul Heelas and others. I've attempted to work out these ideas in the pages of the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (2003, 2007) and *Social Compass* (2008). The thrust of my other writings has been on the problem of modernity and modernisation. In the 1980s and 90s, the contentious debates between the postmodernists and modernists made it difficult to see clearly what the fuss was about. Then suddenly the fog seemed to lift when communism collapsed and capitalism

careened ahead to make modernity relevant once more. But then Eisenstadt introduced the idea of multiple modernities to disclaim the Western exclusiveness of modernity. I had toyed with this idea in the conclusion of my article in *Current Sociology*, but now I felt it was time to examine the irony of this term. My initial exploration of this irony resulted in two articles that appeared in the *European Journal of Social Theory* (2006) and *Social Science Information* (2008). At the moment, I'm working on the meaning of tradition in multiple modernities. If the word modernity is still very much with us, it implies that we have not fully abandoned the promises of the modern age even though some of us may have become jaded with the term. Yet modernity cannot promise us immortality. So how do we as moderns deal with the question of our mortality in an age of knowledge expansion, technological dynamism and unrelenting consumption? Do we just die and simply fade away like others have done in previous ages? I've tried to explore these questions in several articles in *Illness, Crisis & Loss*, *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, *Sociology*, and *Time & Society*. I don't think we can really say why we are mesmerised by modernity until we confront the meaning of our mortality in an era of deepening individuality.

YSG: You have been a keen observer and theorist of religions and religious practices in Malaysia. In relation to what you have researched, how do you see them panning out in recent years? Are you optimistic/pessimistic?

RL: This seems to be a loaded question. If I say optimistic, then others would say I am being unrealistic. If I say pessimistic, then others would say I am being negative. To suggest an answer requires a proper understanding of the politics of Malaysian ethnicities and the culture of Malaysian politics. You'll find a discussion of these issues in *Heaven in Transition* and *Sacred Tensions*, and also in recent works by Andrew Willford, Timothy Daniels and Gerhard Hoffstaedter. We've to be clear on the understanding that Malaysian society may seem to be predominantly Islamic but its constitutional guarantee of religious freedom and tra-

dition of political compromise allow sufficient space for the existence and continuation of other religions without a persistent siege mentality. There have been some unhappy cases of religious conversion and disputes over land taken up by religious structures, but as a whole the modus vivendi established since independence in 1957 has been maintained and hopefully will not fragment in years to come.

YSG: How do you view the intellectual and academic climate in Malaysia these days? What needs to be done to make things better?

RL: Certainly, the intellectual climate today is a far cry from what I experienced in 1970s and early 1980s. Firstly, there was tighter government control of speech autonomy at the university after 1974 – although now that control is being relaxed. Students have become easily intimidated and cagey about offering their opinions. Secondly, the spread of mass education has raised levels of academic achievement and knowledge accumulation but not necessarily a sense of intellectualism for its own sake. This is partly because academic success is always judged according to measurable performances, and not always according to under-publicised or unpublicised self-effort in dealing with critical questions. This may also be the situation in other countries, since intellectualism for its own sake seldom leads to jobs. Thirdly, attempts to organise intellectual groups to discuss and publish ongoing research attracted many people in the 1970s but seemed to have fizzled out after the 1990s. Perhaps, disillusionment and retirement contributed to a slackened effort in maintaining this trend of activity. I don't really know what needs to be done to improve the intellectual climate – maybe a large infusion of Vitamin M (M for money)?

YSG: What occupies your time and energy these days?

RL: After my retirement I became a type of ronin – a person working outside the space of an institution. I capitalised on unfettered time to finish my writing projects. But then one quickly realises that unfettered

time is just an illusion because when you're retired, you're not necessarily over the hill but on the upper slopes, peering over the ridge to see what's on the other side – a downward slope, more hills and mountain ranges? Even a sociologist of religion at this point must come to personalise the question of spirituality

and consciousness, to ask if his/her understanding of religion can indeed contribute to his/her preparation to transit from this world. Playing tourist for a while provided some insights into the globalisation of modernity but not the path of this transition. That probably requires the cultivation of abnegation.

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