

Professor Ann Brooks and Professor Graeme Hugo
School of Social Sciences



Distinguished Social Sciences Public Lecture Series

Inaugural lecture

in conjunction with
The Confucius Institute at the University of Adelaide

Limiting Confucian Meritocracy

Associate Professor Sor-Hoon Tan
Napier 102 (Level 1); 6-8pm, 16 July 2008

Confucianism is well known for promoting the “rule of virtue.” Its belief that the most virtuous should govern could be extended into a more general belief in meritocracy: any job should go to the person most qualified for it, and people should be rewarded according to their contributions, i.e. their merits. This may be seen as a version of “treating unequals unequally,” which is one way of defending inequalities in a Confucian society. However, is this all that can be said about Confucian attitudes to the value of equality?

The Confucian position is not exactly what is understood as meritocratic. The best

person should get the job, but it does not mean that she could demand to be rewarded for her contribution/merit. Ancient Confucian texts reveal a social ideal in which resources are distributed according to needs before merits and which expects the most virtuous to demand the least. In examining the limits of “meritocracy” in Confucianism, I shall raise some questions about the facile reconciliation of Confucianism and capitalism, and show that, while Confucians would not be against acquisition of wealth or competition, they would however pause and raise ethical questions about the increasing inequalities in global capitalism.



Associate Professor Tan Sor Hoon is an Associate Professor of Philosophy and currently heads the Philosophy Department at the National University of Singapore. She has authored *Confucian Democracy: A Deweyan Reconstruction* (2004). She edited *Challenging Citizenship: Group Membership and Cultural Identity in a Global Age* (2005); and is co-editor of *The Moral Circle and the Self: Chinese and Western Approaches* (2003), *Filial Piety in Chinese Thought and History* (2004), and *Democracy as Culture: Deweyan Pragmatism in a Globalizing World* (2008, forthcoming). Her works have appeared in *Philosophy East and West*, *International Philosophical Quarterly*, *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, and *Asian Philosophy*, among others, and edited volumes on Chinese Philosophy and Comparative Philosophy, most recently in *Confucius Now: Contemporary Encounters with the Analects*, ed. David Jones (Open Court, 2008); *Educations and Their Purposes*, eds. Roger Ames and Peter Hershock (University of Hawaii Press, 2008).

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