



Shui-Yan Tang (1960-Present)

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Development
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"My own background helps me to be sympathetic to international students...I can be sympathetic to their way of thinking." Shui-Yan Tang, 2005.

Overview

Shui Yan Tang's research focuses on institutional analysis and design, common-pool resource governance, environmental politics and policy, collaborative governance, and governance reform. He is the author of *Institutions and Collective Action: Self-Governance in Irrigation* (ICS Press, 1992) and *Ten Principles for a Rule-ordered Society: Enhancing China's Governing Capacity* (China Economic Publishing House, 2012). He has published in numerous journals, including *Comparative Politics*, *Economic Development Quarterly*, *Environment and Planning A*, *Governance*, *Harvard Business Review*, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, *Land Economics*, *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *Public Administration Review*, *The China Quarterly*, and *World Development*. Professor Tang was associate editor of the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*. [More information is available here.](#)

Early Life and Education

Yan Tang was born on March 29, 1960. He and his five siblings were raised by their father, Pui-Yin Tang, and mother, Oei-Yu Luk, in a working-class family. Tang's parents stressed education to their children, believing it was the key to a better life. Tang was a good student, but he knew it would take more than that to get into college. He had to be excellent. "Getting into college in Hong Kong was difficult," he says. "One out of twenty students had a chance to go to college." Fortunately, higher education was free at the time. Tang studied diligently and was eventually accepted into the Chinese University of Hong Kong, with the goal of becoming an academic. That goal, along with his intellectual curiosity and determination, would eventually lead Tang to pursue a career in the environmental field.

Tang graduated with a bachelor's degree in government and public administration in 1982, and earned his Masters of Philosophy in government and public administration in 1984. Knowing he wanted to teach in an academic setting, he applied to doctoral programs at universities in western countries. "It was common practice to go to either England or America to get a PhD," Tang

explains. “I was following the path that needed to be followed.” He decided on Indiana University, where he obtained his doctorate in Public Policy in 1989.

Career

It was during his time as a doctoral student that Tang became interested in the environmental field. Working as a research assistant to Professor Elinor Ostrom, Tang helped put together a major research project examining the use of common-pool resources, such as irrigation systems, waters systems, fisheries, and ground water. Ostrom postulated that it is difficult to exclude users from such resources, leading to overuse and scarcity; thus, the research focused on institutional solutions to managing local common pool resources. Tang specifically examined case studies of people in different countries who developed varieties of governing arrangements for their local resources. Based on this research and work from his dissertation, Tang was able to write a book titled *Institutions and Collective Action:: Self-Governance in Irrigation*, which was published in 1992. He continued to work on environmentally related projects for the next ten years.

One of these projects examined the environmental movement in Taiwan. Tang studied how the environmental movement influenced that government’s democratization process, and vice versa. He also authored several articles about Taiwanese communities trying to negotiate autonomous management of their natural resources. Tang’s work concluded that, in order for such communities to succeed, they had to resolve collective action problems amongst themselves and negotiate with the larger society to gain recognition of their autonomy and the right to manage their own resources. He continues to study these issues with a colleague, Professor Ching-Ping Tang, currently at the National Chung Cheng University in Taiwan.

Tang finished his doctorate at the age of twenty-nine and immediately sought a position with the University of Southern California (USC). He taught and conducted research, first as an assistant professor, later becoming an associate professor with tenure with tenure in 1995. He was promoted to full professor in 2002. “When I started, most of my students were younger than myself...I was able to move up academic ladder quickly,” Tang says. He is currently a faculty member in The School of Policy, Planning, and Development (SPPD) at USC. Tang also directs the school’s Master of Public Administration (MPA) program. He says that although some of his courses are not environmentally-focused, much of his research and some of his course material examine environmental issues.

Importance of Mentoring to Career

Tang notes that as a student and aspiring academic, he had mentors offering guidance and support. Two of those mentors were Vincent and Elinor Ostrom of Indiana University, both of whom Tang says had the most influence on his thinking about environmental issues. He cites them as sources of intellectual inspiration, particularly Elinor Ostrom’s research on how to encourage collective solutions to managing local natural resources. “The key is self-governance,” Tang explains. “Not just relying on government regulations – but getting local people to actually govern their own local natural resources. They need to develop solutions at the local level for communities to manage local common-pool resources.”

Mentoring Others

Tang, in turn, has been a mentor to many young people during his career. Many of his students in the Master of Public Administration program at the University of Southern California have been people of color; in fact, most of his doctoral students are international students from Asian countries. Tang says that he has a supportive mentoring relationship with them. As one of the few minority faculty members in his department, he has served as a role model for many of his students, especially those students from other countries and cultures. As Tang observes, “My own background helps me to be sympathetic to international minority students at this university. I can be sympathetic to their way of thinking.”

Highlights

Tang’s career as an academic has offered both rewards and challenges. Tang says that getting tenure, and being promoted to full professor status in a relatively short period, has been a key achievement. His academic publication record is strong—he has written some thirty articles on environmental issues alone in the past ten years. On the other hand, he remembers a time before he completed his doctorate when he was not sure he would be able to find a job. He was uncertain about where he would go, and says it was the most difficult part of his career. He also remembers graduate school as a challenging, and often lonely, experience. “I had to learn a lot of new things and do it by myself,” Tang says. “But I was able to make good use of it and later do well as a faculty member.”

Despite those challenges, Tang says his decision to stay in the environmental field was not a difficult one. He believes he has been able to combine the teaching and research duties of a professor fairly well. He enjoys working with doctoral students and helping them advance their careers; he has even assisted with publishing papers before they finished their degrees. Tang says seeing them do good research, and produce quality work, is very satisfying.

Advice to Young Professionals

Tang also notes that being a faculty member has its perks. It is a flexible job, allowing him to schedule his own hours to teach, do research, read, and write. He applauds his colleagues for being supportive, and enjoys the diverse USC campus. Finally, he enjoys the recognition and acceptance his career achievements have earned him. In his own words: “People tend to respect academics.”

For More Information

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This interview was conducted in 2015.