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WOMEN IN PHILOSOPHY

An interview with Professor Ye Ru

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From the editors

Dear reader,

Published papers and official records secure our academic milestones, but they usually only show a question answered. They rarely show how the question was found, the years of reading that went nowhere, the approaches tried and set aside, or the teacher whose single sentence changed a direction.

We founded *The Review* to capture this actual practice of doing philosophy. Our goal is to document the Department's shared intellectual history and reveal the full person behind the scholarship. By recording how colleagues shape each other's thinking and how scholars navigate personal and institutional realities, we want to ensure that future cohorts inherit a living community to guide them, rather than just a collection of finished arguments.

Our inaugural issue is dedicated to women in philosophy. For a long time, the Department had no women professors. The scholars who ultimately changed that, and the women who studied here during those years, have rarely been asked about their experiences at length. To begin this conversation, we sit down with Professor Ye Ru. She shares how she chooses her questions, what she has learned about higher-order evidence, the reality of being one of the few women in formal epistemology, and what she would say to a philosopher just entering the field.

An undertaking like this requires an environment that supports students in shaping their own academic culture. We are grateful to the Department for trusting us with the space to develop this project. This conversation marks the first entry in what we envision as an enduring, student-led tradition. We have structured *The Review* as a living archive, built on written procedures and agreed succession plans, so that future students can sustain and develop it.

We invite you to read, reflect, and join the conversation. If there are voices or topics you feel are missing from these pages, we welcome you to write to us.

Chuk Tai Wai, Lee Kwok Shun, and Li Peggy Jesslyn

Founding Editors · Sha Tin, October 2026

INTERVIEW • ISSUE ONE

A conversation with Professor Ye Ru

Conducted by Chuk Tai Wai, Lee Kwok Shun, and Li Peggy Jesslyn

Professor Ye Ru studied philosophy at Wuhan University, spent an exchange year at Hope College, and received her PhD from Cornell University. Her current research focuses on higher-order evidence, epistemic permissivism, and formal epistemology. The following conversation was held in Mandarin and translated into English by the editors.

The Review: Your undergraduate thesis at Wuhan University was on Plantinga's account of warrant. From there, you went to Hope College and then to Cornell for your PhD. That is a path through three very different academic cultures. What set that sequence of moves in motion, and when did philosophy become something you knew you would build a career around?

Ye Ru: I decided very late. In high school I was troubled by questions about the meaning of life. I was in the science stream, but I was always drawn to literature, and a teacher told me that if I wanted to answer questions like that, I should go to the philosophy department. So I did. Then for my first two years at Wuhan University I was quite lost. I was reading Kant, Husserl and Heidegger and understanding almost none of it.

The Review: Did they answer your questions about the meaning of life?

Ye Ru: No.

The Review: What changed your trajectory?

Ye Ru: In my third year, a logician opened a course called Introduction to Western Philosophy. He emphasised reasoning, and saying clearly what we think, and he kept telling us to study the problems rather than the people. I could follow every class, and I seemed to be rather good at it. He had us break into groups. I loved it.

The Review: And how did that lead to a PhD at Cornell?

Ye Ru: In my third year I also applied for an exchange programme run by an American foundation, which sends a few Chinese students each year to American colleges. I was assigned to Hope College, a very small liberal arts college whose philosophy department had four or five teachers. I took one philosophy course there, Introduction to Epistemology. The teacher did not really work in epistemology; he worked on philosophy of language, but with so few people he taught everything, and his classroom ran the way my logic teacher's had. He told me that research in North America was basically all done in that way. So I applied to graduate school, to many places, and Cornell made me the best offer.

The Review: Yet, you came close to leaving philosophy altogether.

Ye Ru: I wavered for years. Graduate school was very competitive, and sometimes the study of philosophy felt uninteresting, almost useless. In my fourth year my adviser went to Singapore on a long visit and did not return until almost my defence, so for three years I was effectively on my own. I had a lot of freedom, and I used it to consider leaving. I audited statistics in the mathematics department and programming in computer science, partly with employment in mind. But after a while I found that what I liked were the more foundational questions. By the end of my sixth year I accepted the obvious. I was suited to academic work, and of all the subjects, philosophy was the one I loved best. So I stayed.

The Review: We often hear that PhD programmes in analytic philosophy are fiercely competitive. What was the environment at Cornell like?

Ye Ru: Relaxed and friendly. People say that places like MIT, Princeton, NYU or Rutgers are far more competitive, though I only know that by hearsay. Nobody told us to finish in five or six years; some people in my department took seven or eight. No teacher pushed us to attend conferences or to publish. One member of my committee even told me not to rush into print and to concentrate on the dissertation instead. In my time almost nobody published before graduating. So my wavering did not come from the environment. My classmates were simply all excellent, and I suspected I was not equally capable. Philosophy also seemed to have lost some of what had first drawn me to it; I don't know why. But after I had explored other fields, philosophy was still the most interesting.

The Review: At a departmental gathering, you once described how, as a student, you deliberately stopped putting your energy into grades. You realised that grades depended less on you than on your cohort, whom you could not choose, and that pouring energy into them was an attempt to control what cannot be controlled. Does that kind of philosophical analysis still help you today?

Ye Ru: There is a field now called philosophical consulting, and when I first heard of it I was puzzled. Can philosophers really do counselling? Its basic idea is that many of our mental troubles come from not thinking the problem through. You have not analysed where the feeling comes from, and you have not asked whether the stress is rational. Once you see, by philosophical analysis, that the stress is not rational, you can tell yourself so, and the pressure gradually falls. That is one place where I find philosophy genuinely useful, and it works on me too. When I examine my own stress and find it is not rational, I gradually relax.

The Review: You now carry research, teaching, and administration all at once. Does the same method carry you through those professional pressures?

Ye Ru: Ordinary busyness is not solved by a change of perspective. It is solved by planning my time better, working more efficiently, executing better, and I find that kind easy. What is hard is the pressure that truly requires a shift of mindset. There, philosophical analysis genuinely helps me.

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is not rational, you can tell yourself so, and the pressure
gradually falls.*

— Ye Ru

The Review: At Cornell, Nicholas Silins directed your dissertation and Maria Lasonen-Aarnio served as your external adviser. How did their influence shape your thinking during that period, and is there a specific idea from your dissertation that you are still working with today?

Ye Ru: Silins works on attention, awareness, consciousness and perception, and I was never very interested in those topics. But I learned a great deal from him, and not specific knowledge. I am the sort who zooms in; I will polish a small point over and over, which is good, but it means I sometimes zoom in too far. From him I learned the value of the big picture. In his seminars he would not labour a detailed argument. He would explain where a theory came from, how it developed, why an argument matters and why anyone should care. In our meetings I also came to see that formal tools can genuinely help philosophy. Maria was my external adviser, and her work appears in the first two chapters of my book, which survey the literature. In defending calibrationism I had to respond to her level-splitting view, and the argument I raised was epistemic *akrasia*. On the first order you believe that Jack is the murderer; on the higher order you hold it an open question whether that belief is rational. You do not affirm it and you do not deny it; you suspend. That is like believing you should stop playing games and start writing, while playing on. It is weakness of will in epistemology, and it is not my original point; many people have made it.

The Review: Your 2023 book with Cambridge University Press develops your account of higher-order evidence and calibrationism, and you have a forthcoming paper in *The Journal of Philosophy* on the value of evidence in decision-making. Could you walk us through a practical situation where these abstract ideas make a visible difference in how a person should reason?

Ye Ru: Take a detective who believes that Jack is the murderer. The traces at the scene strongly support the belief; that is his first-order evidence. But he has not slept for a long time, and he knows that in this state his judgements are unreliable. That is higher-order evidence. The standard calibrationist says that if the higher-order evidence shows him to be thirty per cent reliable when sleep-deprived, his confidence that Jack is the murderer should drop to thirty per cent. On my account the higher-order evidence works one step earlier. It does not set your confidence directly. It lowers how far you rely on your original evidence, and where your confidence then settles depends on the other information you have. There is no universal answer. I find this the natural reaction. When you learn that you are tired, you simply trust your tired judgement less. It also avoids certain conflicts that the standard view is often said to face. A steadfast reasoner, by contrast, would keep his confidence exactly where it was. The same interest runs through the forthcoming paper. Why do we always want more evidence? The intuition is that more of it helps us towards the truth and helps us decide well. I. J. Good gave a formal proof of that intuition, and later authors argued that his proof rests on assumptions and produced counterexamples in which even an ideally rational person should refuse free evidence. My paper answers them. The arguments fail, and where there are no costs, the intuition stands. Gather all the evidence you can.

The Review: You also have a series of papers on epistemic permissivism addressing whether the same evidence can rationally lead two people to different conclusions. Where do you currently stand, and what is the strongest objection you have faced?

Ye Ru: I still believe permissivism. One reason comes from the philosophy of science. What it is rational to believe is not settled by evidence alone; epistemic goals and the weighing of theoretical virtues also matter. Two scientists may hold the same evidence about a hypothesis, one prizing simplicity, the other explanatory power, and both may reason well and reach different conclusions. Some people are cautious by temperament. Even when the evidence is nearly enough, they suspend, because a false belief seems to them the worst outcome. Others believe as soon as the evidence is roughly sufficient, because to them gaining truth matters more than the risk of error. I cannot see a uniquely rational way to weigh these things. Both are rational. The strongest objections are Roger White's, from 2005. If my opponent's belief can be as rational as mine, what supports my own choice? I cannot say that mine is more rational, and I cannot invoke a coin flip, for that would be a reason unrelated to truth. And how should a juror vote when rationality permits opposite verdicts? There is also the truth problem, which White only gestured at and Sophie Horowitz formulated sharply. If rationality permits my opponent a false belief, what does rationality do for him? In one paper I answer with a convergence theory. The permitted disagreement need not last; as evidence accumulates, the positions converge, and what they converge on is the truth.

The Review: You have presented at epistemology conferences across East and Southeast Asia, including the Asian Epistemology Workshop, the NUS workshop in Singapore, and Frontiers in Epistemology at Yonsei University, and you have worked in the American, mainland Chinese and Hong Kong philosophy communities. How do you see epistemology developing in these regions, and what will happen as these communities and the anglophone one interact more?

Ye Ru: It is not only epistemology. Analytic philosophy in Asia as a whole is growing, mainly because more and more people are coming here to work, those of us who studied in the West and returned, and others trained there from the start. For me it is a plain improvement. I used to fly to America for a two-day conference and spend the whole time fighting jet lag, until I stopped wanting to go at all. Now there are strong conferences in Asia, even in mainland China, and I attend as many as I can close to home. A larger community draws more people back, and the community grows further. What troubles me is that we are still following the Euro-American agenda. Even at conferences in China, the questions we discuss are the questions their scholars have posed. I hope that one day Asian scholars will set our own questions and our own research directions, and that Euro-American scholars will come to discuss our questions. Journals are part of that, because publication pressure pushes people towards questions that are easier to publish. Some are already building our own journals and networks, and they deserve our support, though it will take a very long time. Meanwhile we ourselves have to work on the questions already on the table, and work on them well, or no one will come. Language is a real barrier. The first step is still to write and contribute in English, and perhaps in many years they will also join our local discussions. As for the relationship, I expect exchange rather than confrontation. Today we want to join their circle, not to carve out a territory of our own. In the future perhaps there will be no centre, one circle with competition in it, but not two camps.

The Review: Formal epistemology and Bayesian epistemology are subfields where women remain a small minority. Was there a specific moment or setting where that became visible to you, and has it shaped any of the choices you have made in your career?

Ye Ru: At conferences. A room of twenty or thirty people, and one or two women. Even the papers I read have few women authors. However, it has never touched my research. What I work on has nothing to do with how many people work on the problem or whether they are men or women; I choose questions purely by interest. Where it touches me is afterwards, at dinner. When the talk is over and everyone goes to eat together, and everyone else at the table is male, I often do not go. During the talk itself the questions are purely academic and gender disappears. But over a meal there is small talk, men have their own circles and their own topics, and as a shy person I fear I would not fit in. It has not caused me great distress, but it has had its effect, because many professional relationships are formed at those tables. What I wish for is simple enough. Women colleagues to have meals and coffee with. Presenting to a room of male professors does not affect me at all. That is purely academic.

The Review: Students here have sometimes said they lack role models, since the Department long had no women professors. Did you ever feel the lack?

Ye Ru: Never. I have never needed a model; whatever I wanted, I pursued. People differ greatly. But I understand why a model matters to some. If you are unsure where your interests or abilities lie, and a woman near you does this work and does it well, that shows you the path is open. As for the old stereotype, that women are weaker at logic, no teacher ever said to me that girls cannot do deep theory, logic or formal epistemology. And if a statistic really said that women were on average weaker at logical reasoning, it would still say nothing about me. It is a number about a population. If the crime rate of some group is high, does it follow that I, a member of that group, am likely to commit a crime? But if someone you respect says such things, it creates real pressure, and it can make a student feel that this field is not for her. So teachers have a duty here.

The Review: And if you were to give one piece of advice to a woman student in a place like this?

Ye Ru: Whether or not the stereotype exists, ignore it. It has no scientific basis, and even if it did, it would be a statistic about a population, not about you. Follow your own interest.

When you make any choice, especially an academic choice, do not let gender be a factor.

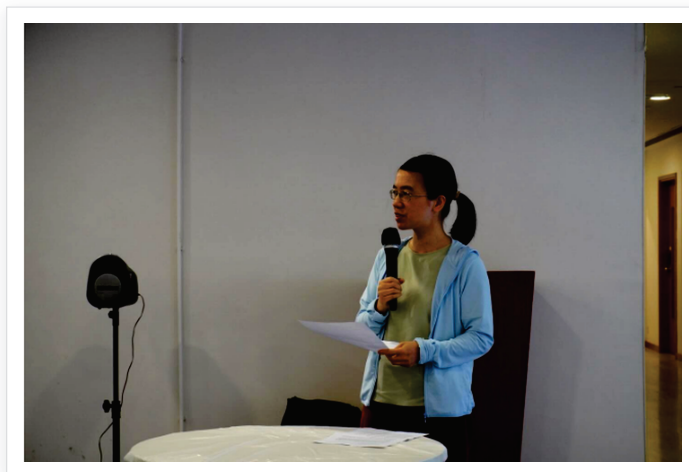
— Ye Ru

The Review: At the October 2025 Philosophy Townhall hosted by the Committee for Equity and Inclusion, you chose to talk about the social expectations you faced as a mother when you moved from Wuhan to Hong Kong for your career. That is something many academics experience but few discuss in professional settings. What do you think makes it so hard to talk about, and what would need to change for it to be easier?

Ye Ru: The most direct reason is that there are so few women scholars. And men seem rarely willing to speak of their families in public, perhaps because it looks like showing weakness; that may be my own stereotype. To say that the family takes your time and brings you pressure is to risk looking less professional, and a serious academic is expected to be wholly given to scholarship. We even have a folk image of the scholar, the Peking University mathematician whose lunch is a steamed bun and a bottle of water. Society takes him as what a scholar should be, all time given to academic work and little to life, hobbies or family, and I think this is what we need to change. What would help is more women scholars, and a greater willingness, from men as well, to share the life outside the work in ordinary settings.

The Review: Looking forward, what are you hoping to build here in the Department?

Ye Ru: I want to do the specific things well, teach my courses, do my research, take my share of departmental service. One small hope is to organise workshops and reading groups over the next few years, so that students and teachers talk with each other more. And I want to keep my own intellectual curiosity safe. I want my research to be led by curiosity, not by practical pressures or by other people's expectations, so that I can keep exploring fields I have never touched, without baggage.



Professor Ye speaking at a departmental gathering.

The Review: Before we end, we want to ask a question off script. The recent AI models deduce spectacularly; mathematics, the field that lives on proof, has felt it first. As a formal epistemologist, what do you think is left for philosophers if machines can master formal tools and reasoning?

Ye Ru: I have never thought that philosophy requires formal tools. Plato wrote clearly with none, and many scholars today use no formal tools and still do philosophy that is insightful and good. It depends on the problem and on the writer. Some people can say an idea with perfect clarity in ordinary language, and for them the tools are unnecessary; tools are only tools. It is true that philosophy, like mathematics, lives on reasoning, and a good argument in plain language is still a piece of logical reasoning. But philosophy has something beyond reasoning, and that is the new perspective. For example, for centuries freedom was thought to require the ability to do otherwise; then Frankfurt argued that what matters is rather how your second-order desires stand to your first-order ones. That is a completely new understanding of the same question, and it is not something you attain merely by being good at reasoning. AI has already shown creativity, solving long-standing mathematical problems with methods no human mathematician had thought of, but the conjecture was still given by humans; it was we who found the problem interesting. Whether AI itself will pose questions of significance, I honestly do not know. Perhaps one day it will. For now it is best at reasoning, and the people who worry most are programmers and mathematicians. But we philosophers are not far behind.

The Review: And finally, for a philosopher early in their career who may one day read this interview, what is one lesson you would pass on?

Ye Ru: Compared with my time, the pressures on young scholars are far greater. Publishing, the job market, networking; many people tell me they can hardly breathe under them. You will feel all of that. But do not forget why you chose philosophy in the first place. Do not lose the charm of it, or your passion for it. You may have to make compromises under pressure; we all do. But let the work be led by your curiosity, not by your competitiveness, and not by the pressure the world puts on you.



From left to right: Li Peggy Jesslyn, Lee Kwok Shun, Chuk Tai Wai and Professor Ye.

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

The Review is built as a living archive, and it relies on the voices of our community. If you have a perspective to share, a scholar you would like to see interviewed, or feedback on our inaugural issue, we welcome your letters.

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