
Inspiring the Youth: An Intergenerational Conversation with a Globally Trained Project Management Teacher-Scholar

Interview with Dr. Yan Liu ¹

Author, Teacher, Scholar
Research Fellow at Nanjing University, China



Interviewed by Evelyn Chao

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Introduction to the interviewee

Dr. Yan Liu received his Ph.D. degree from Delft University of Technology in the Netherlands and continues to be part of the University as a guest researcher in the section of Infrastructure Design and Management. He is also a Research Fellow at the School of Management and Engineering, Nanjing University, China.

Dr. Liu's research focuses on learning within and across large infrastructure projects, collaboration, innovation networks/ecosystems, digital transformation, and project management. He has published peer-reviewed articles in the *International Journal of*

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Project Management, IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management, Project Management Journal, etc.

Dr. Liu received IPMA (International Project Management Association) Outstanding Contribution in Young Researcher Award 2021. He is a Contributing Principal of a PMI-sponsored research project entitled "How will the new talents change project management in a data-rich era?"

In June 2023, he co-led the Nanjing University team and won the third prize in the International Project Management Championship (PMC) in the China Region. PMC is an annual worldwide competition targeted at college students studying project management courses. It is hosted by the IPMA.

Interview

We are about to follow the interview with Dr. Liu where we covered topics from his project management education and teaching experiences in both China and Europe as well as emerging trends in project management. Thank you and I hope you enjoy this conversation.

Evelyn Chao (Chao): Congratulations to you and your students on winning the third prize in the Project Management Championship in the China region. Thank you for accepting my interview request.

Dr. Yan Liu (Liu): Thank you for giving me the opportunity for an interview.

Chao: How did project management come into your life?

Liu: During high school, I had the ambition of studying management science. After the National College Entrance Examination, I considered my interests, college ranking, the city, etc. Finally, I chose Construction Management as my bachelor's program. The essential of Construction Management is project management because construction is based on projects.

Chao: How do you define project management?

Liu: According to PMI, a project is a unique endeavor to pursue a result, a service, or a product. To me, project management is a way to deliver something unique – something that has never existed in this world – with limited resources and a limited schedule. Some project examples include

renovating a bridge, building a high-rise building, or creating a software application. I also believe that project management has a broad definition in this society. Project management is for all interests.

Chao: During my summer in China, I observed that Chinese kids always talked about school or home assignments, but rarely about projects. How would you comment on assumptions you know among the Chinese about project management?

Liu: First of all, many Chinese tend to equal projects with construction projects, like buildings, roads, and bridges. You have to know that in the last few decades, there has been substantial real estate and infrastructure development in the country. That is why they have a limited perception of projects.

Secondly, you mentioned many Chinese value the necessity of *guanxi* (networks) in getting any projects done. Some people tend to think that *guanxi* is valued more than rules. To me, *guanxi* means personal relationship building. This building is essential in any culture - we need the right support from the right people to get anything done, right? I spent almost seven years in Europe. People in Europe also talk about how important it is for a project manager to get mentorship from a senior leader to acquire the resources needed for the project. Humans always share some similarities.

(Interviewer's note: Project Management Institute provides a global network of support and mentorship for its members. It is a great gift to project managers that PMI communities exist all over the world.)

Chao: What do you think about the cultural impact on project management?

Liu: Cultures impact how project managers and teams view and care about the environment --- the government, local residents, nature, etc. One example is that projects are usually defined as temporary endeavors, but Chinese governments and companies like to talk about 5-year or 10-year plans. They tend to look at things from long-term perspectives while paying close attention to government stakeholders.

Chao: You taught project management in both the Netherlands and China. How do you compare your teaching experiences there?

Liu: In terms of knowledge areas, project education is almost the same in both cultures. But the way to teach might be different. Because I have much

fewer students in the Netherlands than in China, I had closer interaction with individuals in the Netherlands. In China, I had to do more to deal with exams. I hope I can have more time with my students in China.

Chao: What project management mindsets are particularly useful for young people like high school students?

Liu: My quick answer is that all the ten project management knowledge areas are useful for people of all ages to learn and apply in their life – schedule management, cost management, risk management, communication management, stakeholder management, etc.² If you want to do anything, you should care about your cost and your schedule. You have to collaborate with others and be careful with the risks. Perhaps schedule management is more relevant to high school students.

Chao: What recommendations do you have for high school students who want to pursue project management in the future?

Liu: Project management is a combination of engineering and social sciences. I cannot recommend a specific course or book for high school students, but for high school students, it may be better to learn project management by doing projects. Reflect as you are doing, get guidance and feedback from others, and think about how to do things better in the future.

Chao: Could you please introduce some emerging trends in the project management field?

Liu: There are many frontiers in the field. For example, how to integrate emerging technologies with traditional project management processes.

One particular trend I want to point out is how to do better stakeholder management to deliver megaprojects. China has completed a lot of megaprojects recently, such as the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge. It lasted over ten years with lots of international team players. There are megaprojects in other countries. The U.K. has Crossrail (a railway construction project centered around London) and High Speed 2 (a planned high-speed railway line in England).

² The ten project management knowledge areas mentioned by Dr. Yan Liu are from *PMBOK® Guide*, 6th edition. They include integration, scope, schedule, cost, quality, resources, communications, procurement, stakeholder, and risk.

Innovation management is another trend in project management. Now, everyone is talking about entrepreneurship. People are thinking about how to come up with more innovative ideas. But how to manage innovations in a structured way is something very challenging.

There are many other challenging areas in project management, like collaborating with different generations. Reading project management journals, such as the *Project Management Journal* and the *International Journal of Project Management*, is a great way to understand emerging trends in the field.

Chao: What meanings do you see in terms of doing the work of promoting project management education among youth?

Liu: I know some teenagers your age. They are being trained in piano, dance, football, etc. For me, playing musical instruments is learning hard skills, while learning project management is learning soft skills, transferable skills. You may not use project skills immediately, but they will help you have a holistic view of a project you will do in the future, communicate and engage with different stakeholders, and be more responsive to risks and uncertainties. Project management skills will help you in the long run.

Another thing I want to say is that project management involves how to deal with yourself - your mindset. Project management is life management because life is temporary and unique. Learning project management can help us have a better attitude toward our lives and careers.

(Interviewer's Reflection: With Dr. Yan Liu, we have noticed that projects are everywhere, and we can apply the concepts of project management in almost every activity we encounter. The biggest lesson is the collaboration with others. Project management is a teaching path where a community helps you to learn about yourself and how you manage different activities with peers to deliver value to the world.)

Reference

Project Management Institute. (2017). *PMBOK® Guide*, 6th edition.

About the Interviewer



Evelyn Chao

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Evelyn Chao is a high school student passionate about learning, practicing, and advocating project management. She earned the Project Management Ready Certification from the Project Management Institute (PMI). Since then, she has channeled her enthusiasm into championing project management education, particularly among diverse, young individuals eager to expand their knowledge and make a positive impact on society. Believing in the transformative power of education, Evelyn took the initiative to establish the nonprofit organization PM Ready Inc., accessible at www.pmready.org. PM Ready serves as a unique platform for fostering intergenerational conversations about project leadership and inspiring youth of diverse backgrounds to apply project management learning to achieve their full potential and make positive social impacts.

Evelyn currently studies at Sidwell Friends School in Washington, DC. Beyond her academic pursuits, she is an active member of the U.S. Naval Sea Cadets, a violinist in the Maryland Classic Youth Orchestra (Symphony), and a skater on the DC Edge Synchronized Skating Team. Outside school, she enjoys reading, watching movies with her family, and hanging out with her friends. Evelyn is a loving older sister to two siblings, Elaine and Elise, and takes pleasure in nurturing their inquisitiveness by engaging them in enjoyable small-scale projects.