Professor Sunney Xie Xiaoliang

Acceptance Speech

Distinguished Council Chairman Professor Chai, Vice-Chancellor Professor Lo, colleagues and guests:

It is a genuine honour to speak on behalf of my fellow honorands: the Honourable Tommy Cheung Yu-yan, Dr Michael Hui Koon-man and Professor the Honourable Lau Siu-kai. We are deeply grateful to the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) for these honorary doctorates, which we accept with both joy and humility.

For many years, my professional address read: Harvard University, Oxford Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts – three British names in one sentence for an institution in New England. By comparison, CUHK was founded by Chinese people, on Chinese soil, with a Chinese soul. As its founding Vice-Chancellor, the late Dr Choh-ming Li, once said: no university can be separated from its own national heritage. Every university is a bridge between its own culture and others.

This vision was shaped by history. After 1949, a wave of intellectual migration from the Chinese Mainland gave rise to three colleges in Hong Kong, whose merger in 1963 became CUHK. 63 years later, this university has risen remarkably on the global stage.

Among CUHK's founding colleges, Chung Chi College traces its roots to Yenching University in Beijing – founded by John Leighton Stuart, an American missionary and later US Ambassador to China. Although Yenching University only existed for 33 years, it had a strong influence on higher education around the world. When I was at Harvard, I often visited the Harvard-Yenching Library, which was established through the collaboration between Harvard University and Yenching University by John Leighton Stuart. On the other hand, Yenching's historic campus, Yan Yuan, is now home to Peking University (PKU). It is where I grew up, completed my undergraduate studies and now teach as the Lee Shau-kee Professor. Extraordinarily beautiful, Yan Yuan stands on land that was once part of the Old Summer Palace, which was looted and burned twice by foreign invaders under a dynasty that had lost its way, serving as a silent reminder of a humiliating past. Founded 128 years ago by Emperor Guangxu, PKU has evolved from the birthplace of the May Fourth Movement – where democracy, science and liberty first inspired a generation of students – into a leading global institution.

Since 1985, CUHK and PKU have built an enduring partnership. In 2023 and 2024, our two universities jointly organised the Sino-US University Presidents' Dialogue, fostering international cooperation in higher education during this particularly challenging geopolitical period. I have personally enjoyed rubbing shoulders with Vice-Chancellors Professor Rocky Tuan Sung-chi and Professor Dennis Lo Yuk-ming at the numerous meetings we have attended together.

A great university is defined by its scholars. Professor Dennis Lo is a native of Hong Kong. He studied at Cambridge, trained at Oxford, and, when Hong Kong returned to China, he chose to come back home. That decision must have reflected his deep confidence in the nation's future – though I suspect the lack of decent dim sum in Oxford might have helped. He could hardly have imagined that he would one day become Vice-Chancellor here. Nor could he have known that his later discovery of foetal DNA floating in maternal blood plasma would transform prenatal testing for Down syndrome and other chromosomal conditions. As a fellow scientist, I know that finding foetal DNA in maternal blood is like finding a needle in a haystack, except the haystack is moody and keeps moving. Today, his work benefits patients in over 100 countries and has rightly earned him both the Breakthrough Prize and the Lasker Award.

Like Dennis, I also came back home, though much later than him. In 2009, Harvard generously allowed me to take on a part-time appointment at PKU which led to a decade of commuting between Boston and Beijing.

I can tell you this, more than twenty round trips a year on a 13-hour flight has a remarkable way of making one reconsider life choices.

In 2018, after 20 years at Harvard, I returned full-time to my alma mater – PKU. It was not an easy decision for me. But I wanted to be part of the transformation of Chinese science, because the momentum was undeniable. The country I had left as a young student was no longer the country to which I returned.

My decision, however, came at a personal cost. For years, my children and I were worlds apart. When I returned to China they were still in college, and I was not sure if they would forgive me. But my son and daughter are here in the audience today. Together with my wife, I thank them for coming such a long way, and for their understanding of the choice I made and their support.

History has a way of echoing across generations. In the early 1950s, my grandfather, an architecture professor, was part of the wave of intellectual migration from the Chinese Mainland to Hong Kong. He later taught at the University of Hong Kong before moving to the United States. My mother was an undergraduate student at Fudan University then, and stayed in the Chinese Mainland. Fiercely patriotic, she had to separate from her parents and make her own way – I suppose I inherited that gene from her. Painful as the separation was, I suppose that I should be grateful, for without it she might never have met my father, and I would not be standing here today.

It was not until 20 years later, after President Nixon's visit to China in 1972 that my family was reunited, to our great joy. As a 10-year-old child, I met my grandparents for the first time. When my grandmother gave me 20 US dollars, it felt like winning the lottery, though I did not fully appreciate the significance of that reunion at that time – but I do now. Here we are, decades later, and our family is reunited once again. History has come full circle!

Here I want to thank the Lee Shau Kee Foundation, the Shaw Foundation and the Qiu Shi Science & Technologies Foundation for their generous support for my research in China. At PKU, my research team has been advancing a genomic medicine technology complementary to Professor Lo's work, preimplantation genetic testing for test-tube babies. To date, it has enabled more than ten thousand couples to avoid passing on genetic diseases to their children and future generations. The futures of ten thousand families have been rewritten.

At Changping Laboratory, which was founded during the pandemic, we identified a broad-spectrum SARS-CoV-2 neutralising antibody, which has not been evaded by any variants to date. Recently, we have turned our research focus to Alzheimer's disease. Many of you may know that, in 2009, the former CUHK Vice-Chancellor Professor Sir Charles Kao Kuen received the Nobel Prize in Physics for fibre optics. What is less known is that, as he stood on the Nobel stage, he was already confronting the advancing shadow of Alzheimer's disease. He illuminated the world with light even as his own was slowly fading. His story reminds us that the most urgent scientific challenges are profoundly human, and addressing them lies at the heart of our universities' mission.

Chinese universities were once students of the West. Through generations of effort, we now stand firmly on the shoulders of giants. World-changing contributions by Chinese scholars are no longer exceptional – they are expected. Institutions like CUHK and PKU continue to rise, not in competition with the past, but in service of the future. Our mission is clear: to achieve original breakthroughs for the benefit of humankind.

Allow me to conclude in Mandarin: *An individual's destiny is, above all, fundamentally shaped by the destiny of their nation. China's national trajectory has undergone a profound transformation. We have left behind a past marked by poverty, backwardness, and humiliation, and are now advancing toward the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Universities play a pivotal role in this national renewal. Let us devote ourselves to the cultivation of talent, uphold openness and cooperation, and commit to addressing the pressing challenges of humanity – living up to our times and contributing China's share to the advancement of world civilisation.*

Thank you.