

185th Congregation of the University of Hong Kong

By Anna Wu Hung Yuk

(please check against delivery)

This is a very special occasion for me as it is for you. Celebrating your graduation brings back memories of my days at the University of Hong Kong. Today, you join me as fellow alumni and I share in your joy and success. Your parents, families, friends and all of us are very proud of your achievements.

Today is your day and you will go down in history as the graduates of the centennial year of the University of Hong Kong. It will be another 100 years before this honour can be claimed by anyone else. This year is also the 100th anniversary of the Xinhai Revolution with which the history of this University was inextricably intertwined. What might be less obvious to you is perhaps that 2011 is also the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day.

The confluence of these anniversaries is of symbolic significance to me. The Xinhai Revolution marked the fall of the last imperial dynasty in China. Just at the time when people in the west realized the importance of women, people in China decided that they no longer wanted an emperor to rule over them and embarked on the road to republicanism and modernity. People in the east and west both want the same things - equal rights for all, and the ability to shape one's future.

The University of Hong Kong traces its origin to the former Hong Kong College of Medicine for Chinese, founded by the London Missionary Society in 1887. The college is known for its alumnus, Sun Yat Sen, China's Father of the Nation. As an alumnus, he visited the University on 20 Feb 1923 and declared Hong Kong and the University of Hong Kong as his intellectual birthplace. A memorial statue stands today by the side of the lily pond. I have vivid memories of the lily pond including one of a mid autumn night with students singing and waving lanterns by the pond. It was the centre of many student activities during my time at the University.

The University was founded by Governor Lugard in 1911. Contributions in the early years came from different parties, in Hong Kong and abroad. One prominent contributor was the ethnic minority (Parsi) businessman H.N. Mody, after whom Mody Road in Tsim Sha Tsui is named. From the Chinese community, major donors included Tang Chi Ngong and Fung Ping Shan, both of whom have campus buildings named after them. Then there were the hongks, such as Swires and Hong Kong Bank, and of course the government of the United Kingdom and that of Hong Kong.

The first graduates came in 1916, 23 of them. The university was founded as an all-male institution and women students were first admitted ten years later. Today, you are adding 7,406 to the number representing 53% women and 47% men. It is incredible!

The University of Hong Kong is a living monument of history, tradition and the values of education and it wove a unique social fabric rich in contrasting values and in the diversity of its people and of ideas from both the east and the west.

The motto of the university is Wisdom and Virtue. The Chinese motto comprises “ 明德 ming tak” , meaning illustrious virtue, and “ 格物 kak mat” meaning the investigation of things. These words pay homage to the Confucian Classic, the Great Learning, which taught that the expansion of knowledge was dependent on the investigation of things and that the cultivation of the person was the root of everything.

The Great Learning played a major role in Chinese politics. Its text was incorporated into the imperial examination system. Passing this exam was a prerequisite to securing political office and a student’s knowledge and ability were the sole determinants. The system was based on meritocracy, as was your admission and graduation from this University. One of the tenets of the Great Learning was that each and every person was capable of learning and self-cultivation regardless of one’s background or status.

In the modern day, the spirit of the Great Learning can be found in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which provides that,

“All persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to the equal protection of the law. In this respect, the law shall prohibit any discrimination and guarantee to all persons equal and effective protection against discrimination on any ground such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinions, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”

The covenant has been incorporated into the Hong Kong Basic Law and this provision is also in the Hong Kong Bill of Rights.

The equal opportunities laws with which I have been intimately involved are based on these norms and on the values of meritocracy, equality and respect for diversity.

Although the University of Hong Kong was set up to impart western learning to Hong Kong students, the concept of meritocracy underlying the Great Learning and the imperial examination system had spread from China to the west. The world’s civil service exam first occurred in the Han Dynasty in the 2nd Century BC. It was a system designed to maintain power over a large empire of diverse and uneven landscape. Government positions and ranks were

determined through this exam on the basis of merit alone. Education became the key to social mobility and it acted as the equalizer, as it should.

The British Empire first adopted this meritocratic system of administration in British India in the 17th Century. Competitive examination was used for hiring of company managers and for promotion of employees to prevent corruption and favouritism. This system was later implemented in the rest of the Commonwealth by colonial administrators and in Britain in the late 19th Century.

Education is the first port of call for self development. Education represents hope and fulfillment but education unfortunately has not always been made available to all and the pursuit of development, hope and fulfillment has more often than not been made gender and class based.

Higher education is a vehicle of opportunity for the talented and not an entitlement for the privileged. Thus we have what is known as the 'need-blind' recruitment policy of talented students. Let's look not at where they come from but at what they are capable of becoming. That is why the statue of Lady Justice holding the scales of justice is blind folded, to show that the dispensation of justice must be fair and equal.

Equality and equal opportunities are human rights and behind these rights is a threefold development and economic mandate.

For the individual – everyone has the right to development.

For business – diversity enhances growth.

For the community – investment in human capital advances development.

Of all forms of human rights, nothing can be more basic than the rights to life and survival. A natural extension of these rights is the right to self development, namely self cultivation. What is life without the right to sustain life and the right to self development? A level playing field for individual development can only be achieved by prohibiting discrimination and providing for equal opportunities in education, employment and other spheres of life.

An essential aspect of business is the relentless drive to get the best talents and the best ideas. Colour, creed, gender, social, economic or political status have no place in our search for talents and drive for innovation. Meritocracy is based on knowledge and ability. IBM has just appointed the best person to be its CEO, for the first time, a woman, Virginia Rometty. IBM and many Fortune 500 companies have made diversity a tool for growth.

For a community, development of individual abilities produces self-reliance and it drives down dependency on social welfare. Many anti-poverty measures are directly pegged on the capacity of the individual to develop. This is investment in human capital which allows human development to take place on a sustainable and widely shared basis.

Margaret Mead, a very well known anthropologist, said:

“If we are to achieve a richer culture, rich in contrasting values, we must recognize the whole gamut of human potentialities and so weave a less arbitrary social fabric, one in which each diverse human gift will find a place.”

My fellow alumni, the University of Hong Kong is built on the bedrock of meritocracy, equality and diversity. We share a common past and these values have defined us and made us who we are and what we are. We share a common future, the success of which depends on how well we shape it with these values. We have to make these values matter to all of us. With that let me extend my warmest congratulations to you once again, graduates of 2011. You have made it and I wish you success in all your future endeavours.