

Disclaimer

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An Open Letter to Undergraduate Students at My University: My Journey in Search of Hope

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Recently, I encountered Cornel West's quote on hope in CUHK¹. This attempt to endorse hope reminded me of the importance of hoping: having something to look forward to, and live for.

Two texts in the "In Dialogue With Humanity" course inspired my search for hope: "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844" by Karl Marx, and Thich Nhat Hanh's translation of the *Heart Sutra*. They set up two distinct depictions of the individual in social settings and helped me understand how a university environment can make it hard for us to be hopeful all the time, but also how we can maintain hope as a student at CUHK.

Reflecting on my current journey in search of hope, I realised that hope is related to our self-understanding. Since "hope" is to have something to live for, it is personal and relies on how you view yourself. Marx's text and the *Heart Sutra* have shown me how self-understanding can be shaped by

1 The quote: "The courage to hope, like laughter and dance, is an attempt to endure, to persevere, to fight, and to struggle come what may. Nothing can extinguish or crush radical hope—no matter what we continue to think critically about, care deeply for, or hope substantively to achieve—and this is the blues shining through the darkness." (West 53)

social environments like CUHK, and whether the role of the self in social institutions can be reconciled with the human capacity to have faith.

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Although hope isn't explicitly mentioned in Marx's text, his ideas suggest that one's scope for hoping (which affects your search for hope) is limited by their view of the environment. For many students, hope is the desire for a **particular** event occurring, in the context of a productivity-driven environment like university. Your progress as a student is determined by objective criterion like your GPA. The university environment seemingly overpowers the student. You may have chosen particular courses, after considering your likelihood of getting good grades. Thus you make choices as a student, based on how well they complement your progress in the system, hoping that you will achieve the particular desired outcome (of good grades).

Searching for hope under these circumstances is challenging for me. Marx demonstrates the issues that arise when the institution affects the individual's ability to define himself and his goals. Your search for hope is not something personalised that necessarily "belong to [your] essential being" (193); rather your personal goals may be set aside in search of something that is objectively recognised as good by the system. When you are in search of a particular kind of hope—to do well as a student "worker"—it can sometimes feel like "when [you are] working [you do] not feel [yourself]" (193), similarly to the worker's estrangement from his humanity in Marx's text.

It's hard to remain hopeful when the way you perceive yourself in your environment, is as a "worker" and not a human. Anticipating something

for personal fulfilment is the difference between passionate living, and “conscious life activity” (195) (resulting from “dehumanisation” objectifying one’s life). Marx also cautions “the estrangement of man from man” (196), as a consequence of self-estrangement. Not only are you divided from others, but must “oppose” them because the working world creates “intensity of competition among the workers” (185). This can pressure you into “hoping to exceed” the performance of other workers, which cautions the danger of negatively impacting self-esteem if you don’t meet certain expectations.

At CUHK, it is important to remember that we are not just “university students”; we are human beings whose worth is not defined simply by the grades we receive and our position at university. As I learned from the *Heart Sutra*, there is much wonder to discover in human beings. It is important for us to be able to look beyond our positions as students. Reading the *Heart Sutra* showed me a need to evaluate our surroundings in **relation** to us, as we should not neglect our individual worth. Perhaps unlike in Marx’s world of the worker, the individual and environment are not two distinct entities; instead they are intertwined in their existence.

According to the *Heart Sutra*, what restricts us in our search for hope is when we wrongly characterise the individual in society by a role we have been assigned. What “liberates” us to search unrestricted for hope, is “break[ing] free from such ignorance, and to see things as they are”. (114)

The *Heart Sutra* teaches us about “inter-being” and “emptiness”, in relation to how we perceive ourselves and the world around us. “Inter-being” suggests that everything originates from the presence of something else. In describing “inter-being”, we also learn of “emptiness”: not as a matter of “nothingness, nonbeing, and nonexistence” (118), but rather emptiness of a *separate self* (121). Thus, the idea of being “in search” of hope in the

context of the Heart Sutra is more like being able to exercise our capacity to hope. Because nothing has an independent self, we cannot “grasp” onto hope. Thus there can be no “end” to the search for hope; it is not something you can hold onto. But perhaps in the same way the *Heart Sutra* describes *nirvana* (a “spiritual goal”), hope is “not the object of our searching” (179). We just need to understand that there are no real “limitations” as to what we can hope for, to become enlightened and exercise our capacity to hope (which we have always had).

Writing this letter was initially aimed at reflecting on the meaning of an undergraduate student’s search for hope in CUHK with the help of ideas in texts. I now realise that in doing this, we are implicitly branding ourselves as undergraduate students which could impact our search for hope. The *Heart Sutra* challenges the idea that hope has to be affected by your role as a CUHK student, rather than just as a human being. It seems critical of those who hope in relation to their environment, especially if these environments are “rigid” and institutionalised like universities. Having a fixed system to regulate human beings generally in society has its flaws, because human nature is not fixed. “We cling to the wrong perception that everything is constant and unchanging” (121). Yet humans are constantly changing; our body ages, our feelings “change or pass” with time. Thus our search for hope is always evolving, and it doesn’t seem right for us to unnaturally confine the scope of our hoping solely based on our student roles in university.

From the Sutra’s perspective of “inter-being” and “emptiness”, the environment does not have power over the individual: in fact, it could not exist without the individual. Your environment doesn’t limit your scope for hoping, because you are *part* of your environment. Since the environment

poses no limitations as to what you can hope for, there is more reason for you to be hopeful. Rather than needing to maximise competitiveness as a student worker in your environment (Marx), the Sutra suggests you shouldn't see yourself as distinct from the people around you. Rather than viewing classmates as competitors, or the professors as having authority over you, university is a community where we are all working together and learning from each other. At CUHK we are not divided by our "roles", but are united by our shared humanity and interactions with each other. The Sutra shows us how in our state of inter-being, "the whole universe has come together" (126) not only to form our physical body, but our thoughts and feelings. This connects us to others in society, uniting us on a humanistic level.

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Other Ways for Searching for Hope in the *Heart Sutra* and Marx?

Although the *Heart Sutra* encourages us to look beyond labels (prescribed by the environment), the text doesn't claim that that one's societal role is entirely irrelevant to your search for hope. The significance of searching for hope as a student can be justified if you naturally value academia, for example, and being a student allows you to do things that complement your core values. People like this are still searching for hope in a way that is most desirable to them naturally as human beings, rather than searching for a particular kind of hope as a direct result of the expectations that their role places on them. Individual values are always prioritised over a "duty" to live up to outside expectations.

Another argument is that your core values can be shaped **by** your environment. This way, both Marx's view of the environment shaping the worker, and living in accordance with your core values as suggested in the Sutra, can complement each other. Perhaps even in Marx's generally more pessimistic view of the student worker, there is human capacity to have faith. So long as the student is not dehumanised by their work, their university work can appeal to their core human values and help them achieve a desirable sense of hope. Regardless, I find Marx's philosophy restricting. The depiction of the individual as a worker in Marx's text is still reductionist at its core, lacking the humanistic aspect necessary for hope. Even if they can be compatible at times, natural, human qualities are "not essential to the capitalist mode of production"; they are devalued in Marx's world of the worker. In embracing both philosophies, you are still part of the overpowering system that Marx describes, whose very existence seems intuitively wrong.

The Sutra's ideas should be prioritised when searching for hope. Marx shows us how the "worker" is just a tool, "machine-like": when it can't achieve its purpose, it is no longer "fit" for its job. When we value the individual, we gain qualities like compassion for others as human beings. This is rewarding, so we should learn to hope based on our individual value(s). If we allow the environment to completely dictate the scope of what we hope for, we are actively limiting ourselves.

A possible criticism of the Sutra in guiding our search for hope, is how its ideas are unrealistic. "Transcend[ing] our own views" (120) in our search for unbridled hope can be difficult if these "preconceived notions" of the world are all you have ever known. Despite this, in the context of West's quote in needing "courage to hope" (53), the Sutra's ideas are still relevant. In attempting to transcend our current view, we are being courageous

knowing that things may not work out. That nobility is commendable, for in hoping we never know whether such hopes will come true. When we do this, we are strong, and turn our hoping into something “radical” that “nothing can extinguish or crush”.

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After looking at Marx and the *Heart Sutra*, I have a different perception of university experience, and what it means for me as a student to be in search of hope. They have enhanced my self-understanding, and my understanding of other people. I realised that our search for hope isn’t limited to searching for it as students, and what makes this “journey” meaningful is that it doesn’t end after university, but is life-long. Marx’s text and the *Heart Sutra* have inspired me to avoid searching for hope that is specific to our “roles” in society, for these can impose limits that detract from the “wonder” of humans.

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Teacher’s comment:

Chung’s essay is a convincing argument about the meaning of studying at the university, which first, acknowledges the challenges and doubts in all honesty. She then contextualizes her inquiry in the perennial question of what it means to be human in contemporary society today. She writes with a cool mind and a warm heart, demonstrating both shrewdness in her analysis and empathy for her fellow students at the same time. Her choice of the two classics from starkly differently intellectual contexts is bold and productive—her adaptation of them to an urgent, real-life problem turns out to be insightful. The reflection that Chung goes through in the essay demonstrates the ardor of the work of hope itself, which is certainly a quality of life readers could emulate. (Yeung Yang)