



An Address given by Professor Richard Charles Levin, BA, BLitt, PhD

I am truly sorry that I cannot be with you in person today to celebrate and rejoice in your accomplishments. But I am delighted that I can join you by video – one of the many tools that has brought people and universities across the globe closer together.

I am greatly honored by the award of the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws, and I am profoundly grateful. CUHK and Yale have been partners for many years, in the marvelous work at the Yale-China Language Center and in research conducted jointly by some of our leading professors in the study of Hong Kong and southern China. The honorary degree you award me today helps to symbolize the importance of our institutional partnership, and I hope that it will inspire others at Yale and CUHK to work together in the future.

In his citation, Professor Parker referred to the 2010 speech that I delivered in the United Kingdom on "The Rise of Asia's Universities". In that lecture, later published in the journal, *Foreign Affairs*, I noted the ascendancy of Asia in the 21st century and observed that Asia's economic and social development requires not only expanded access to higher education, but also improving the quality of that education for those who aspire to be leaders in industry, government, civil society, and the academy. The leading nations of Asia have set their sights on building world-class universities. These institutions need to be research engines that stimulate discovery and innovation, while at the same time training students to think critically and independently, and encouraging their creative contributions to the organizations they serve and the nations they inhabit.

The Chinese University of Hong Kong has long been part of this important trend in the development of Asian higher education. As you enter your fiftieth anniversary year, you should take great pride in the mark you have made already. In just a half-century, you have built a faculty that includes multiple Nobel laureates and winners of the Fields Medal, the Veblen Prize, and Turing Award. Thanks to the vision of CUHK's leadership, its students have opportunities to work with colleagues all over the world.

Why is it important to develop in our students the capacity to think critically and independently? Why is it important that our research expand the frontiers of human understanding? And why are these attributes at the core of what it means to be a world-class university? My answer to this question is encapsulated in the inaugural address I gave to the Yale community nearly twenty years ago, when I said: "We must help our society become what we aspire to be inside our walls – a place where human potential can be fully realized."



This – the realization of human potential, in ourselves and for those around us – is the ultimate goal of higher education. If students are encouraged and enabled to reach their potential, and if they come to understand that their potential is best realized by being both independent thinkers and contributors to the community around them, they will go out into the world and shape it in that image, extending to others the opportunity to live satisfying and fulfilling lives. In this ever-shrinking world, and as the East continues to ascend, the recognition of this broader purpose of education is more important than ever. Yes, the rising nations of the East all recognize the importance of a well-trained workforce as a means to economic growth. But they are also coming to recognize that world-class universities will ultimately fail in their effort to prepare students to reach their potential if they do not cultivate independent, critical thinkers – those who have the greatest capacity to solve society’s problems and contribute to the well being of others.

The *Yale Report* of 1828, a seminal document in the history of American higher education, distinguished between the “discipline” and the “furniture” of the mind. Mastering a specific body of knowledge – acquiring the “furniture” of the mind – is of diminishing value in our rapidly changing world. Students who aspire to be leaders in business, or medicine, or government, or in the academy, whether it be in Hong Kong, other parts of Asia, or anywhere in the world, need also the “discipline” of the mind – the ability to adapt to constantly changing circumstances, confront new facts, and solve problems creatively. As Cardinal Newman, another great 19th century theorist of education, argued: the ability to assimilate new information and solve problems is the most important characteristic of a well-educated person.

You students who are graduating today are fortunate to have studied at an institution that firmly believes in these principles. You have had the opportunity to concentrate on the subjects that interest you, while being broadly exposed to the great issues of the day. You have been trained to “discipline” your minds and you have acquired some very useful “furniture” as well. So now it is up to you. As you leave this place and enter the wider society, I urge you to use your powers of independent thinking to shape the world around you for the betterment of all. You have the opportunity to prove Cardinal Newman right. I have every confidence that you will.