



## An address given by Professor Alison F. Richard, MA, PhD, DL

A few weeks ago, we at Cambridge held our own ceremony to confer honorary degrees. It struck me then, that even though some of those recognised had strings of national and international honours already, there is something about recognition by a *university* that causes singular pride and pleasure.

When a university awards a degree, it marks a milestone in the life and learning of an individual; it formally links the university's reputation to the attainments of the recipient; and the university's standing as an institution of teaching and research attests to the level of those attainments.

We recipients are very proud and very happy to have this great honour bestowed on us by you today. On behalf of all three of us, I begin my remarks with warm and sincere thanks to The Chinese University of Hong Kong for the award, not of a medal or a ribbon or a trophy, but of the most valuable and meaningful recognition a university can make: the award of a degree.

I feel humble and somewhat daunted to be charged with the task of responding on behalf of my distinguished fellow honorees. Contemplating what I might say on this occasion, it seemed to me that our three lives and experiences point to certain important values of universities – and to a celebration of The Chinese University of Hong Kong in particular – and I have composed my remarks accordingly.

### **The value of arts and humanities**

Professor Kenneth PAI is a renowned writer, playwright, and producer of 'Kun' opera, an ancient art form that he promotes to modern audiences and keeps fresh. At the same time, he is no stranger to university life. By awarding him an honorary degree, I believe that CUHK is not only celebrating the great distinction of Professor Pai in his field, but also the cultural value of dramatic art and the civilising mission of universities.

The origins of the modern university go back a thousand years. For most of their history, the role of universities in the creation and preservation of art and culture needed no explanation or defence, the importance of the role was not in doubt. That certainty is less evident today.

Universities are under great pressure to demonstrate our material impact on economics and human health, and our contributions to material well-being – never more so than in today's global recession. We do so vigorously, and with strong evidence to demonstrate our success: through educating students and preparing them for their careers, and through the inventions of scientists and engineers, universities are a hugely positive force for good, and we are justly proud of our contributions.

But the value of universities cannot be construed in terms of material wealth and well-being alone, for we are stewards and creators of cultural wealth as well, for our own societies



and for the world. This broad, encompassing idea of the university is embodied here at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, and it is reflected in your celebration of the accomplishments of Professor Pai.

### **Giving, and the collegiate university**

My other fellow honorary graduate today is Dr Michael WU, the Secretary of the Wu Yee Sun Charitable Foundation, and a member of a family who have supported CUHK for many decades. Among the attributes of universities is, surely, the ability to inspire loyalty, affection and generosity from generation to generation.

And so it is that this generation is able to celebrate the foundation of a new College at CUHK named to honour the leading member of the previous generation of Dr Wu's family: Wu Yee Sun.

I know something about Colleges. In fact, I like to think I have 800 years of experience of colleges! The collegiate system is an integral part of Cambridge University, and we have enjoyed discussing with colleagues here the organization and above all the benefits of colleges. And what are those benefits?

Well, it is a challenge for a modern university to be, simultaneously, a globally competitive research institution *and* a place where an 18-year-old, leaving home for the first time, can live and learn, do a bit of growing up, and feel at home. The collegiate system provides a genius of scale: Colleges are communities within the larger community, constructed on a very human scale; they allow the University to grow large without losing the intimacy and support so valuable to students and, of course, to academic staff too. Colleges are places where boundaries are crossed: between academic disciplines, between generations, and between scholarship, performance and practice. However new, Colleges are instantly integral to the lives of their student members, and quickly become integral to the soul of the University community.

The first Cambridge College, Peterhouse, was founded in 1284; the most recent, Robinson, in 1977. Colleges have proved their value to Cambridge time and again over the centuries, and I congratulate the Chinese University on your decision to expand the colleges here. We at Cambridge look forward to forming close, college-to-college ties with them, and indeed one is already being established, for our Emmanuel College and your S.H. Ho College will have an exchange programme generously funded by the S.H. Ho Foundation. While on the subject of links between Cambridge and CUHK's Colleges, I offer a particular salute to the Master-designate of Morningside College, Professor Sir James Mirrlees, and Lady Mirrlees – who, I like to think, are here as Special Emissaries from Cambridge!

One of the joys of being a university leader is the opportunity to encounter enlightened philanthropy in the service of a great cause. As I have learned, it is both exhilarating and moving when the vision, means and generosity of a benefactor meet and match the aspirations and ambitions of the university. These are true partnerships, and Cambridge and CUHK



flourish in no small measure thanks to these partnerships. In honouring Dr Wu and his family, the Chinese University recognizes the critical importance of philanthropy to the lives of our universities.

## **Universities and the world**

As for me, I stand before you as a lifelong academic and, latterly, a university leader, and I speak here to colleagues engaged in the same enterprise. I would like to expand a little, then, on the purposes of universities in the modern world.

Every university today is part of a larger whole, and that whole is at once local, national, and global. We three honorary graduates today have different experiences of university life, in Canada, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States – but we are linked by The Chinese University of Hong Kong, by our presence at this wonderful ceremony – and by our degrees. We are fellow alumni for the rest of our lives! Similarly, although our universities have followed different paths to the present, their future surely will be much more closely linked to one another than their past.

Perhaps because of my 30-year experience in the USA, I have been influenced in my understanding of the purposes of universities by Clark Kerr, who was President of the University of California, and architect of the 'California system' of higher education – in the state where your Vice-Chancellor Professor Lau spent many years of his professional life. Kerr's writing has helped me understand Cambridge as a product of a long and complex history which has moved back and forth between Europe and North America, and which more and more draws in, and upon, Asia too.

Kerr identifies three strands in the development of the university in the West:

First, an "Oxford and Cambridge" strand, which emphasizes education and the co-residence of students and teachers.

Second, a continental European strand epitomized by Humboldt's foundation of Berlin University in 1809 – uniting teaching with research.

Third, an American land-grant strand, emphasizing broad access, and applicable knowledge: agriculture, business and so on.

I see close up all three of these historic strands in one location and at one time, in my own university in Cambridge, and I know they are woven into the fabric of CUHK too.

There are tensions between these different roles – productive and important though each is individually. In particular, our immediate utility to society risks crowding out the long-term contributions at the heart of our mission: education, and the transformational discoveries and ideas that change the way the world works, and change the way the world thinks. This tension is not resolvable. Our best safeguards, I believe, are vigilance, the constant reaffirmation of our



purposes, and the strenuous protection of our independence and freedom to experiment.

### **The fourth strand**

From my lectern here today, I would add a fourth strand to Clark Kerr's three. In the last half-century, at an increasing pace, universities are forming international links. These links deliver more activity, and indeed new activity, that cannot be produced by our institutions working alone. The East-West Alliance, a network of 10 universities supported by the Li Ka Shing Foundation, to which Cambridge and CUHK both belong, is but one example of a partnership that is adding new value – in this case in the field of medical research.

We universities are repositories of societies' knowledge and creators of new knowledge, and we transmit knowledge from generation to generation. Universities have proved durable and flexible organizations in fulfilling those roles, and in these times, as never before, we are finding ways of collaborating – to educate our students, to innovate, and to share knowledge and understanding. My fourth strand, then, brings universities of the world together in a spirit of international partnership and collaboration.

### **Conclusion**

The troubled world of the 21st century needs this – even more than it perhaps realises.

This university – young enough to be creating its mission, yet old enough to make wise choices – is a source of pride for Hong Kong, and an important contributor to the global fellowship of universities. We three honorary graduates share today in that pride, and in the future of this splendid institution. On behalf of us all, I salute you and I thank you.