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Doctor of Social Sciences *honoris causa*

Address

First of all, on behalf of Dr Simon Ip and Dr Sophia Kao, my fellow graduands at today's ceremony, and myself, I would like to express our deepest gratitude to the entire Lingnan University community, for the great honour that has been bestowed upon us. We are all extremely proud to become the newest alumni of Lingnan University.

Today, I would like to take this opportunity to share my observations on the heritage of Lingnan University with you. Lingnan University was founded in Guangzhou (then known in English as Canton) in 1888, and re-established in Hong Kong in 1967. "Lingnan" is a name that has stood the test of time. Over the more than 130 years of its existence, it has produced many, many distinguished alumni.

What are the special connotations of the name "Lingnan"?

First, the characters "嶺南" themselves literally mean the region "south of the ridge" or more precisely the region "south of the five ridges (五嶺之南)". While there seems to be some disagreement among scholars about the identity of the ridges, they are, roughly speaking, all located in the borderland between Hunan, Jiangxi, southern Fujian, Guangxi and northern Guangdong. The Lingnan region lies between the five ridges and the southern coast of China. It has always been more experimental, more open, more progressive and more internationalised than the rest of the country. It should therefore be no surprise that most overseas Chinese hail from the Lingnan region and that the first foreign trading posts were in Macau and Guangzhou.

The Lingnan region also has its own unique literary, artistic and culinary tradition. It has benefitted from the quite civilised ancient imperial practice of exiling court officials who offended the Emperor to the more remote parts of the country. Two of the most famous examples of such exiles to the region were Han Yu in the Tang Dynasty and Su Shi in the Song Dynasty. Han served as an official in Chaozhou, and the people there were so grateful for what he had done for them that they named both the nearby mountain and river after him. Su served in Huizhou and Hainan, and left us the famous poem to express the sentiment that he would not mind living in the Lingnan region forever because then he would be able to eat three hundred lychees every day (日啖荔枝三百顆，不辭長作嶺南人).

In art, there is the unique Lingnan School of painting, in part because of the Lingnan region's own distinct fauna and flora and landscapes. This innovative style of painting was also significantly influenced by Western techniques. "The three greats of Lingnan (嶺南三傑)" — Gao Jianfu, Gao Qifeng and Chen Shuren — are considered the spiritual leaders of this School. And it is not necessary for me to dwell on Guangdong cuisine, which includes regional specialties in major centres like Guangzhou and Chaozhou, as well as the food of the Hakka people. The name "Lingnan" evokes all of these various associations.

Today, the Lingnan University brand is also closely associated with liberal arts education (博雅教育). Lingnan University is the standard bearer of liberal arts education not only in Hong Kong

but also in the entire East Asian region. It is the only institution of higher learning in Hong Kong that promotes and implements the idea of a liberal arts education similar to that offered by, for example, the oldest colleges at Oxford and Cambridge in the UK, and Amherst College and Williams College in the US. There is also a parallel but distinct and even older tradition of colleges (書院) in China, dating back to the Tang Dynasty in the eighth century more than five centuries earlier than the foundation of Balliol College and Merton College at Oxford in the mid-thirteenth century. Lingnan University is a spiritual synthesis of the best of these two educational traditions.

A liberal arts education aims to produce graduates who are broadly educated and intellectually curious and inquisitive, but who are also at the same time critical and thoughtful, and who are firmly committed to rational discourse and have acquired the ability to learn on their own. It encourages students to learn how to distinguish between truth and falsehood, and between right and wrong, on their own. It does not aim to produce professionals per se, but aims to nurture a holistic human being.

Unfortunately, the liberal arts education is not yet well understood in this part of the world, including Hong Kong, especially by the parents of college-bound students. Since it is neither professional nor vocational, the typical question posed by a sceptical parent is: “How will you find a job after graduation?” This is not an unfair question, because a typical liberal arts graduate has no specific employable skill. A good answer to this question might be that a liberal arts education is a foundation. In the US, many leaders in different fields are liberal arts graduates, but their undergraduate degree was just a start. Most of them went to graduate school or professional school in fields such as business, law or medicine, perhaps after working for a couple years. Sadly, there is no simple path to law or medicine for a liberal arts graduate in Hong Kong.

However, Hong Kong employers can and should be educated to understand that even though liberal arts graduates have no specific skills, they can think better, learn faster, and see the big picture. In this day and age, when things are so fast-moving and complex, these qualities can be much more valuable than specific skills. Employers should realise that it is more valuable to have an employee who can learn fast and adapt to a new situation quickly than an employee with soon-to-be-obsolete skills. Such employees are also more likely to become the leaders of tomorrow.

Lingnan University has provided and continues to provide a great service to Hong Kong by adhering faithfully to its liberal arts education mission, producing graduates instilled with the intellectual capacity and life-long self-learning ability to become potential leaders in their chosen fields of work. This is a key distinguishing advantage of Lingnan University and it should persevere on this path.

In closing, all of us—Dr Ip, Dr Kao and I—want to thank the Lingnan University community once again and wish Lingnan University even greater success in the future!