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Doctor of Business Administration *honoris causa*

Address

Critical Thinking Has Never Been More Important

Council Chairman Andrew Yao, President Leonard Cheng, Distinguished Guests and Fellow Honorary Graduates,

On behalf of Professor Zhong Nanshan, Professor Deane E. Neubauer and Ms Sylvia Chang Ai-chia, I would like to express our gratitude to Lingnan University for conferring these Honorary Doctoral Degrees on us today. We feel deeply honoured and humble.

Everybody will agree that universities play an indispensable role in advancing the development and well-being of any modern society by educating young people and conducting academic and scientific research. While commending the great contributions to society that Lingnan and other universities are making, I cannot think of any other period in which universities have played a more crucial role in helping to develop critical thinking in students.

Critical thinking is a mindset or way of thinking. It requires the diligent use of common sense, self-discipline and hard work. Critical thinking enables a person to differentiate between fact and fiction, and between truth and falsehood. Without the facts and truths, it will be hard to know what is right and what is wrong, which is the precondition for us to act rationally and reasonably. However, in the last twenty years the world has changed so much so that it has made critical thinking even more important than ever before. So, what has changed in the new era compared with the old world?

In the virtual world of the internet, social media networks, be they Facebook, YouTube, Instagram or whatever, often serve as echo chambers as well as platforms for information and communication. For reasons that I don't propose to elaborate here, many social media platforms will feed you with videos that you want to see and messages you want to hear. At the same time, social groups, large or small, with similar views, tend to congregate and grow at high speed through the social media or platforms. After a while, you don't get to see or hear from people with different views and perspectives. As a result, biases can easily be solidified and amplified amongst so-called "like-minded" groups. This echo chamber phenomenon and its divisive and

damaging effects on the society were vividly demonstrated during the highly turbulent period in Hong Kong in the second half of 2019, a problem which has, to a large extent, continued up till now.

For those of us who recognise that social media is not reliable as a source of information, the traditional solution of resorting to the mainstream media as a source of facts has also become somewhat doubtful. Much of the mainstream media has now taken sides politically and cannot be trusted to be entirely neutral or impartial in their news reporting. For example, in the past few years we have seen far too many biased news reports by the Western media on Hong Kong and the Mainland. If the mainstream media have also become less reliable, then what can we do nowadays? Many people, myself included, have for a long time subscribed to the doctrine of “seeing is believing”. However, even this doctrine is now becoming problematic. This is because it is so easy to produce photos or videos that present half-truths or false news. This is not a new problem but modern technology has made it a lot worse than before. Some of us must have realised the power of deepfake technology and are horrified by what it can do to mislead and cheat. It is very hard for ordinary people to distinguish deepfake audio or video from genuine ones. I do hope that some form of technology to detect deepfakes will be developed, but it is not entirely certain as to when this technology will become available and how effective it is going to be.

When the axiom of “seeing is believing” is also cast in doubt, then what hope do we have in the future of seeking to understand what is really going on in this world? Some people have said that we have now entered into a new “post-truth” era in which alternative facts or lies are being churned out everyday, people should not be too bothered in wanting to know the truths. I must say that I don’t agree with the notion that facts and truths do not matter anymore. To tell a lie a thousand times may mislead and deceive many people, but it doesn’t turn a lie into the truth. Rational people must be able to differentiate lies from the truth before they can distinguish right from wrong! A civilized society can only progress if people act rationally and reasonably. So no matter how hard it is going to be, we must not allow our society to go backwards and degenerate into a crowd dominated by irrationality and biases. To cope with this “post-truth” era, we will need to do two things:

- (a) make it a habit to fact-check - it is always useful to cross-check important news stories against different sources before taking anything at face value. Over time, you will have a better sense of what sources or channels would be more credible than the others for fact verification purposes.
- (b) apply critical thinking - very often this requires more diligent use of common sense. I'll use two examples to illustrate this point. Even though most of us are not medical experts, we would agree that the investigation of the original source of COVID-19 is a scientific matter that should be undertaken by scientists and medical experts. Applying our common sense, it would be apparent that the commissioning of intelligence agencies to conduct such investigations would likely have been motivated by a political agenda, which should in turn undermine the credibility of their findings. In the end, it is good to note that the intelligence agencies themselves have claimed that they could not reach any firm conclusion on the source of COVID-19. Another example is the so-called 8/31 incident at the MTR Prince Edward Station. It was alleged that several protesters were killed during the police action in August 2019, despite repeated denials by the police and government agencies. Even when a person who was claimed to be one of the dead persons had emerged alive later, many people still believe that there had been deaths that evening, ignoring the fact no one has ever been able to come up with any specific information on who actually died. This is an obvious but sad example of how some people are lacking in critical thinking and allow reality to be distorted by biases and idiosyncrasies.

Ladies and gentlemen, I fully realise that we must learn to adapt to the internet-enabled world in which people's lives and communications are dominated by the social media. At the same time, the rising tension between the two biggest economies in the world has made it challenging for us to find out what is actually going on due to biased news and propaganda. Despite this difficulty, we still need to search for facts and truths or else we too will lose touch with reality and stand to make the wrong judgements. Fact checking is time-consuming and tiresome, but it is something that can be done by anyone who so chooses. At the same time, critical thinking is a mindset rather than rocket science. There are certain skills and techniques that can be taught to help a

person to apply their mind and be conducive to critical thinking. I am sure that Lingnan and other universities must have introduced courses in this area, but I would encourage them to expand and promote these courses or programmes for the students. For the reasons I have already explained, the world has changed in such a way that there is now a much greater need, as well as urgency, than ever for our society to upgrade its critical thinking capability.

In conclusion, Ladies and Gentlemen, may I thank Lingnan University once again for conferring us the Honorary Doctoral Degrees and wish it continued success in accomplishing its mission as stated in its motto “Education for Service” 「作育英才，服務社會」.

Thank you.