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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.

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謝辭

培養明辨性思考是當務之急

校董會主席姚祖輝先生、校長鄭國漢教授、各榮譽博士、各位來賓：

我謹代表鍾南山教授、Deane E. Neubauer 教授及張艾嘉女士就嶺南大學向我們頒授榮譽博士學位致以由衷謝意。我們深感榮幸，也滿懷謙卑。

相信大家都會同意，大學透過教育年輕一代及進行學術和科學研究，對促進任何現今社會的發展和福祉都扮演一個不可或缺的角色。當我們讚頌嶺大及其他大學對社會所作的重大貢獻時，我相信沒有任何時候較當下更需要大學擔當培養學生**明辨性思考**這個重要角色。

明辨性思考是一種思維或思考模式，需要時刻運用常識、保持自律及勤奮。**明辨性思考**讓大家分清事實與虛構，真相與謬誤。沒有事實與真相，我們就很難知道甚麼是對，甚麼是錯，知道對錯是讓我們理性和適當地行事的先決條件。可是世界在過去二十年轉變得太多，正因如此，**明辨性思考**比從前變得更加重要。到底在新世代相對於舊世界有甚麼轉變？

在這個網絡及社交媒體的虛擬世界，無論是面書、YouTube、Instagram 或其他媒體，除了是分享資訊和溝通的平台，同時亦已變成一個網絡迴音室。當中原因我不打算在此闡述，但大家都知道很多社交媒體平台都會將你想看、想聽的影片傳送給你。同時大大小小、有相同理念的社交團體透過社交媒體平台很容易便聚集起來。沒多久，你已經看不見或聽不到抱持不同意見及觀點的人的看法，因此，所謂同聲同氣的組別很容易就將偏見加深及擴大，這個迴音室效應及它對社會所引致的分裂及破壞性後果，在香港2019年下半年非常動盪的時間就充分展示出來，這個問題至今在很大程度上依然存在。

我們知道社交媒體並不是可靠的資訊來源，但亦不能像過去一樣依賴主流媒體提供事實，因為很多主流媒體在政治上有所取態，所以我們未敢相信它們能在報導新聞時會完全採取中立或不偏不倚的態度。例如在過去幾年，我們已經看到

西方媒體對香港及中國內地很多偏頗的新聞報導。如果連主流媒體都變得越來越不可靠，我們今天當如何自處？很多人，包括我自己，一直都有「眼見為憑」的信念，但今天這個信念都出現問題。因為要偽造圖片或影片去做假新聞已變得非常容易。這不是一個新的問題，但今日的科技令這問題較從前迅速惡化。我們都一定知道深偽技術的威力，並為它的誤導及欺騙能力感到震驚。對普通人而言，實在很難辨別是真聲音/ 影片或是經深偽技術製作的。我很希望有一種科技可以偵察到深度偽造，但不知何年何月才有這樣的發明，而它的成效又將如何。

當「眼見為憑」這項基本原則都備受懷疑，那我們以後還有希望可以理解這個世界究竟發生甚麼事情嗎？有人說我們現在已經進入一個「後真相」年代，每天都有大量另類事實或者謊言，大家都應該不太執著想要知道真相。我絕對不敢苟同事實與真相已不再重要這個說法。說一千次謊言或許可以誤導或者欺騙很多人，但並不能將謊言變為事實。理性的人一定要先能夠分辨謊言和事實，然後再可以分辨對錯。人民一定要懂得理性和適當地行事，文明社會才可以進步。所以無論如何艱難，我們一定不能讓社會倒退，由非理性和偏見成為主流。應對「後真相」年代，我們需要做兩項事情：

- (a) 養成查找事實的習慣—看見重要的新聞報導，在全盤接受報導內容之前，我們應該查看不同的資訊來源，加以核實。假以時日，你便可以知道那一個平台或渠道是較可信。
- (b) 應用**明辨性思考**—很多時候，這是需要勤加應用一般常識。我想用兩個例子來演繹這一點。即使我們不是醫學專家，我們都知道要為新冠疫情追本溯源，應該由科學家和醫學專家進行科學探究。因此，我們應用一般常識就會知道利用情報機構去進行調查大多是源自一些政治動機，大大削弱其可信性。幸好最後該些情報機構亦承認他們未能就新冠疫情的源頭有任何肯定的結論。另一個例子便是地鐵太子站的831事件，有報導指出，2019年8月警察執行行動的時候，有幾個示威者被殺，雖然警方及政府多次否

認，甚至有一個曾經被謠傳是其中一個死者的人後來「復活」出現了，仍然有很多人相信當晚有人被殺，並且無視為何一直沒有關於被殺市民的任何資料。這是一個很明顯但令人難過的例子，說明如果不懂得**明辨性思考**，就很容易令真相被偏見及歪理所扭曲。

各位來賓，我完全明白我們必須要學習適應這個依靠互聯網連繫的世界，以及使用社交媒體來生活和溝通。與此同時，世界兩個最大經濟體系日益緊張的關係亦令我們越來越難知道甚麼是真相，因為很多時媒體報導及宣傳都相當偏頗。縱然艱巨，我們仍然需要追尋事實與真相，否則我們便會遠離現實，容易作出誤判。查找事實很費時，也令人疲累，但卻是我們任何一個人想做便可以做得到的。**明辨性思考**並非太空科技，只是一種思考方法，可以透過學習取得某些技能和方法去幫助培養**明辨性思考**的能力。我相信嶺大及其他大學都已經設有這個範疇的課程，但我鼓勵他們為學生擴展及加強這些課程內容。我已在上述解釋過有關原因，因為世界的轉變，我們的社會比從前有更大和更急切的需要去提升**明辨性思考**的能力。

各位來賓，最後請讓我再次感謝嶺南大學向我們頒授榮譽博士學位，並祝願嶺大能夠繼續成就輝煌，處處體現「作育英才，服務社會」的校訓精神。

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