

**Department of Statistics and Actuarial Science, HKU**

**Undergraduate Welcoming Orientation 2023**

**Date: August 30, 2023**

**Time: 4:00pm**

**Venue: KB223**

**Message to Freshers: A speech by Professor Howell Tong\***

**新生寄語: 湯家豪教授的一席話**

**TIME AND TIDE WAIT FOR NO MAN**

**逝者如斯, 不捨晝夜**



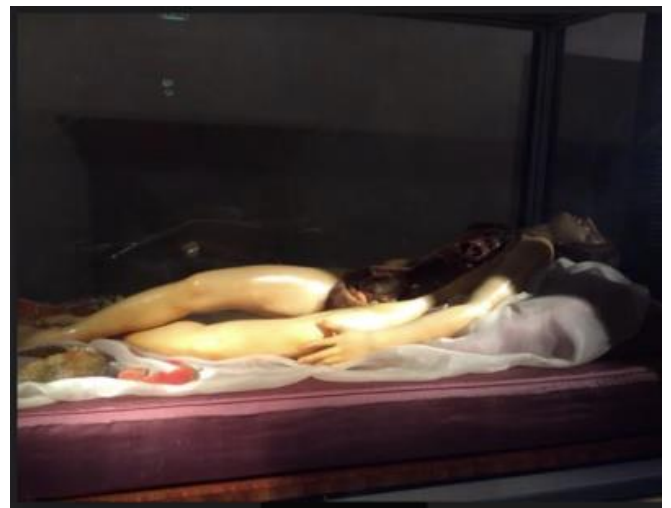
Professor Lee, Fellow students, Teachers, Ladies and Gentlemen,  
What an auspicious occasion! Let me start by offering all our freshers my warmest congratulations. You are the cream of your generation. You have earned your place in this prestigious institution, the University of Hong Kong, that is the oldest university of our vibrant city.

What is the origin of the English word UNIVERSITY? Well, it comes from Latin: *universtas magisterium et scholarium*, meaning *community of teachers and scholars*. This phrase was



first used to describe the University of Bologna, Italy, founded in 1088, which is the oldest continuous university in the western world. Have you heard of the names Copernicus or Dante? The former founded the solar centric theory and latter modern Italian. They were both associated with that university. I am very fortunate to

have had a close association with the same university. During your vacations, I would recommend that you visit the city of Bologna; their university museum contains many outstanding historical exhibits—modern medicine, especially anatomy, owes a huge debt to them. Bologna is also famous for food, (- Remember spaghetti Bolognese?), wine, ice cream, historical sites, architecture (boasting the longest portico in the world among other things), etc.



*Their university museum contains many outstanding historical exhibits—modern medicine, especially anatomy, owes a huge debt to them.*



*I am very fortunate to have had a close association with the University of Bologna. Here I was giving a public lecture in a lecture hall built in 14th Century. The painting on the wall shows the visit of Pope to the city.*

The year 1088 lied within the Song Dynasty in the history of China. As you might know, the Song Dynasty enjoyed extremely high cultural activities and no fewer than 4 institutions of high learning were founded then. One of them was called 岳麓書院, in Changsha, Hunan Province, that was founded in the year 976 during the Northern Song Dynasty. It has continued to modern days in the form of Hunan University. Incidentally, in his youth,



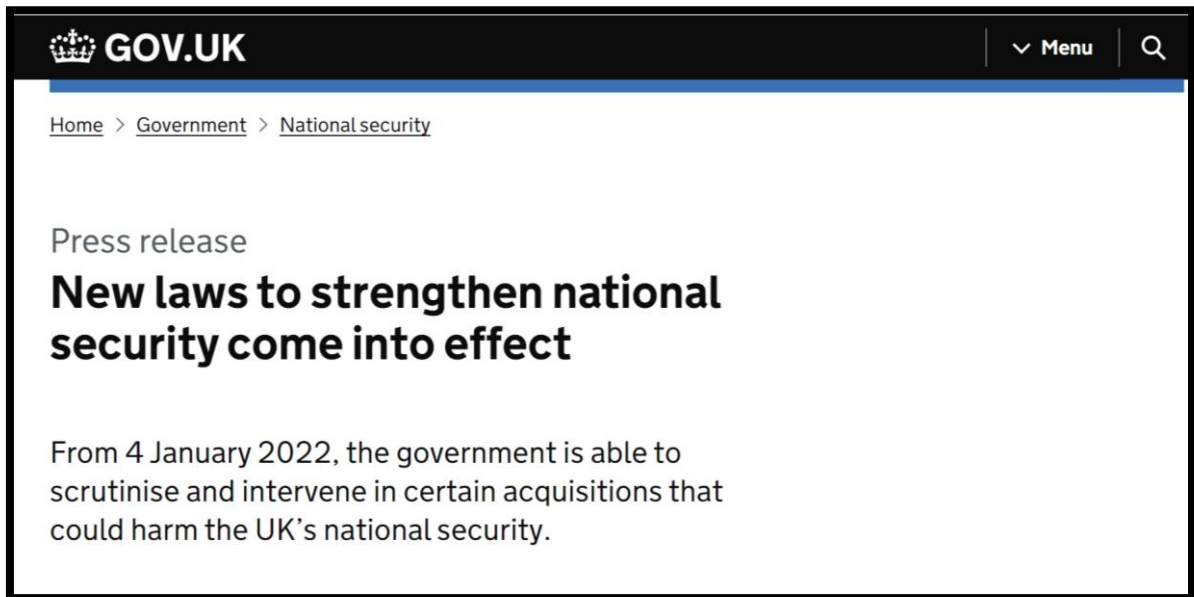
Mao Tse Tung stayed at the place for something like 6 months, which exerted a great influence on him. This is another site you might like to visit one day.

As you can see, universities in both the occidental and the oriental worlds have been the custodian of knowledge as well as the birthplace of new ideas. Universities open the doors to knowledge and, of course, 'Knowledge is Power', as first said by Sir Francis Bacon of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. My life has been intimately connected with this wonderful institution. If I were given another life, I would not hesitate to repeat the journey. I am sure that when you look back 60 years later, like what I am doing now, you will say to yourself: 'How lucky I have been!'

For some of you, your journey to HKU might have been tortuous. For the past few years, Hong Kong witnessed some extraordinary events, something that your parents or your parents' parents had never done before. As a result, many of you had to navigate between daily unrest and your studies. I can just imagine how difficult life must have been for almost all of you. In this context, let me share with you four observations. You might or might not agree with them but at least they are honest.

- (1) I am sure that we all want peace and security.
- (2) I am not aware of any country without National security laws. Interestingly, as recently as in July this year, the UK parliament passed the National Security Act 2023 to further strengthen measures to protect national security. The measures are by no means gentle, some might even

say they are draconian. You can check the contents on the UK government website.



The screenshot shows the GOV.UK website interface. At the top left is the GOV.UK logo with a crown icon. To the right are 'Menu' and search icons. Below the header is a breadcrumb trail: 'Home > Government > National security'. The main content area features the text 'Press release' followed by the title 'New laws to strengthen national security come into effect' in bold. Below the title is a paragraph: 'From 4 January 2022, the government is able to scrutinise and intervene in certain acquisitions that could harm the UK's national security.'

- (3) From what I can see, Hong Kong police have conducted themselves with restraint in dealing with unrests, in comparison with the British, the French and the US.
- (4) To understand international affairs, especially during this turbulent period of international geopolitics, we must not lose sight of the big picture. We must look at history in order to gain a better perspective. For example, I found my recent visit to the 'China's hidden century' exhibition at the British museum very educational. There I saw an original copy of the Nanjing Treaty, the treaty that ceded Hong Kong to Britain in 1842. (That Hong Kong remained under British rule after WW2 was a historical aberration. The Chinese government under Chiang Kai Shek wanted

it back, but Churchill of Britain insisted on retaining it. Eventually there was a compromise.)



The Opium War had a devastating impact on my family. My grandfather was the youngest son of my great grandfather, who saved enough money from laboring in Australia to return to his ancestral village in Xinhui, Guangdong Province. My grandfather was the hope of the Tong family, because he was bright. He did well with his study, becoming quite a noted scholar in his district. Unfortunately, the legalization of opium in China under the Nanjing Treaty ruined him. He became an opium addict, so much so that he eventually lost his family's fortune and his own dignity. So, you can imagine the deep emotion that I felt when I saw the original copy of

the Nanjing Treaty! What I want to say is that China's hundred-year-humiliation has affected every Chinese family, including mine.

My own journey to university started in 1963. I went to the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology, often referred to as UMIST or amusingly as 'You missed' (-now merged with the University of Manchester). My journey was not easy either, because my father was only a waiter at a Chinese restaurant in London. He used all his own savings (£600) for my university fees, accommodation, food, travel and other expenses; the money was only enough to last one year. To cut a long story short, I survived the first year financially. Luckily with the help of my teachers at UMIST, I was given a grant by the London County Council from the second year onwards. I can just imagine my teachers saying to me, 'Howell, UMIST the first year with your grant!' On the brighter side, I benefited hugely from the education there that laid a solid foundation for my future career.

I became a statistician by choice, specializing in time series analysis. You might wonder what a time series is. Very simple. It's history in numbers. We collect observations (i.e., numbers) over time, e.g., the number of HKU freshers each year from say 1911, the year HKU was founded, to 2023, and there we have a time series, a history in numbers. Then we might wonder what story this history might tell us. That requires statistical analysis! I would encourage you to study time series analysis during your time at HKU.



I must tell you that the life of an ethnic Chinese academic in the UK is not always rosy. What has kept me going is the determination to demonstrate to everyone that the Chinese people are just as intelligent as everybody else. This determination has got me where I am today, in the face of outright racism (sometimes even physical) when I was a young man in England, and subtle institutional racism in the UK society even today. Hard fight but worthwhile for there is no other way.

Returning to the year 1911, I should remind you that it predated the founding of the Republic of China by one year. You see, HKU has quite a long history, although not as long as the Hunan University or the University of Bologna. Even so, not many universities can boast having a future president of a country among its alumni. But HKU can, because we have Dr. Sun Yat Sen. His title is Doctor because he was a trained physician, educated at the Hong Kong College of Medicine for Chinese (the forerunner of HKU). By the way, many years later, he was saved by one of his medical teachers when he was kidnapped in London by the Ching government.

Now, in Chinese, university is translated as 大學. Then, what is 大學? The answer is 大學之道在明明德. So, you know why HKU's motto is 明德格物.



Finally, my association with HKU, especially the Department of Statistics and Actuarial Science, started in 1997, the year when Hong Kong was returned to China. It has lasted to this day and will undoubtedly continue to do so in one form or another. The association represents an important corner of my life. Let me assure you all that I have watched and will continue to watch HKU with deep affection.

As many political commentators have recognized, the 21<sup>st</sup> century is an Asian century. And China is at the centre of it. There is no reason why Hong Kong will not benefit from it. Therefore, against this background, I have every confidence that HKU will prosper and go from strength to strength. On this note, I will say to you freshers: You are the lucky generation. Prepare yourself well and grab the golden opportunity.

Let me finish by wishing all freshers successful study, rewarding enlightenment and happiness at the University of Hong Kong.

Thank you all!

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\* Professor Howell Tong is a world-renowned statistician, father of threshold time series models. He was chair professor of statistics, founding dean of the graduate school and later pro-vice chancellor at The University of Hong Kong around the turn of the millennium.