

Wah Yan Speech150411

In Freedom and In Responsibility, A Journalist's Reflection on Wah Yan Education
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1. I have been a journalist for more than 25 years. Quite often people would ask me: "You study law at HKU. Why did you choose to work as a journalist instead of a lawyer?" I usually answered them by saying: "It is my interest. I like it." That is a true answer. But when I go deeper and ask myself: "Why am I interested in writing newspaper articles?" I believe my interest in Chinese writing was developed during my upper primary school years when I fell in love with Kung Fu novels. This interest was consolidated in my secondary school years at Wah Yan College Kowloon.

2. Back in the days when I attended Secondary school, which was 1976 to 1983, Wah Yan was famous for its academic achievement in all science subjects, physics, chemistry, biology, mathematics and also in English, in sports for sure and sometimes in choir singing as well. It was not famous for Chinese learning. Being devoted to Chinese books, Chinese history and Chinese culture in an environment dominated by science and English was an outlier, an exception, and in some sense, a freak.

3. Brother Lo Bak Huen, as he then was, came to Wah Yan in 1976 and became our class teacher. Soon he discovered that I was reading Chinese Kung Fu novels all the time. When I walked up the long stairs to the back door of the school and passed through the long corridors, my eyes were set firmly on the book in front of my chest. I kept reading when I took turns, and went up or down the building floors. Brother Lo was rather concerned. He talked to me privately. He did not ask me to consume less of these outside-curriculum fanciful literature. He just asked me to make sure I am safe. My strange behavior as a form one student was tolerated. He gave me freedom to pursue my interest in Chinese novels. I learnt the responsibility of taking good care of my own life. I was allowed to continue to be an outlier, to be different, to be weird.

4. My interest in Chinese literature and Chinese history led me to choosing the arts class in form six, though my HKCEE result was good enough to apply for the mathematics or biology class. It was not an easy choice. In those days, only a few students in the science class would fail to get into either HKU or CU. In contrast, only a few in the arts class could get in. My mother wanted me to be a doctor. My father wished I would succeed him to run our family business. They had never envisaged me becoming a journalist. With hindsight, the dice was cast when I chose arts instead of science. I walked onto a narrow path, forgoing the much broader path with far better prospect that most people chose.

5. The late Mr Kong Siu Tak was my teacher for both Chinese literature and Chinese history in form six and form seven. He was a master in the study of Chinese words. Once he explained to me the origin of the character "進" in my name. He said the shape of the word in ancient years was a bird. When a bird walks, it can only step forward, not backward. That gave the word its meaning of going forward. He was also a master of Chinese philosophy. Without his detailed explanation on the different factions and phases of development in the Confucian school of thought, I would not comprehend how this ancient ideology can influence China so much, even today.

6. However, I must admit that the way Mr Kong taught was not very appealing if you measure it by modern classroom standard. It was just monologue lecturing and chalk board writing of notes and notes and notes. Sometimes, I wondered why he didn't send us all his written notes for photocopying. It was so time consuming for him to write down the notes and for us to copy them by hand. It was so old fashioned. I had real struggles about attending his class on Chinese history in form seven, because I had dropped it for the HKAL examination. I chose economics and geography apart from Chinese and English. Chinese history was not very useful in applying for universities overseas. At least that was how I thought. But I could not let go the Chinese history class. I kept attending it and copying from Mr Kong's chalk board writing. I thought it was because I wanted to complete my learning of the subject. I didn't realize that it was all because of the teacher.

7. When I got the AL exam result, I ran to tell Mr Kong that I had an A1 in his subject. He was very happy. Subsequently I learnt from a friend Mr Choi Wai Hoi, who was a few years more senior and came back to Wah Yan to teach Chinese, that Mr Kong regarded me as one of his best students, someone he would always care about. Together with Mr Choi, we visited Mr Kong at his home after he retired. He gave me a paper box of old books, hoping that these books would reinforce my interest and knowledge in Chinese philosophy and the study of Chinese words. I was forever grateful for his kindness. He supported my decision to go into journalism but warned me of the danger of politics. He brightened my lonely days of walking on a narrow path. He himself was also an outlier. We both find space to blossom in Wah Yan.

8. Wah Yan was a Catholic school. I was not a Catholic. In form two, I was converted to Protestantism. In form four, I joined a very small Christian fellowship at school. We were eagerly looking for a quiet place to have regular gathering. We asked the school for permission. The school granted us the right to use one of the function rooms once a week. At that time, I was not aware of the generosity of this offer. I just took it for granted. I didn't realize how unusual it was to allow a competing faith to operate openly in a faith-denominated school. Back in those years, I believe the Jesuits as school organizing body had no obligation to do so. They could monopolize the religion environment and ask followers of competing faith to meet outside their campus. But they let us in. They tolerate us. As a student group we were small and fragile. Wah Yan treated us with respect, despite the fact that many Protestant churches in those days were criticizing the Catholic faith as heresy.

9. From my own experience as a Protestant in a Catholic school like Wah Yan, I learn the true meaning of freedom of expression, which requires a sometimes painful tolerance of dissenting opinion and competing arguments. It was of utmost importance in my career as an editorial writer for an intellectual paper. My experience of a broad-minded Catholic education also enable me to be deeply respectful for Catholics. When I was injured and hospitalized last year, I found comfort and encouragement in the writings of a famous Catholic theologian, Father Henri Nouwen. I went to the Catholic bookstore in Central and bought all the books written by Fr Nouwen. There was great insight in it.

10. Hong Kong was at a crossroad. We have been discussing and arguing about how to conduct universal franchise to elect our Chief Executive. Thirty four years ago, I had a real taste of democracy by running for Vice-Chairman of the Students'

Association in Wah Yan. All students from form three and above can vote. There were two cabinets, each comprising of three core members, the Chairman, the vice-chairman and the honorary secretary, competing for the right to form the Executive Committee and run the Students' Association for the year 1981-82. We put up banners and posters every where. Color printing was too expensive. Computer printout of facial images by multiple lines of small dots was in offer at photocopying stores. We had lots of those printouts. Then we went onto the stage to debate with the other cabinet before the students casted their vote. After we won the election, we invited the losing cabinet to join our Executive Committee to enlarge our pool of talents and broaden our appeal. What the current Administration failed to achieve, namely, unity of competing camps in the election to build the Hong Kong Camp, we had done it at a smaller scale in a Catholic school run by the Jesuit Society in 1981.

11. No one directed us how to run the Students' Association. There was no teacher sitting in our committee meetings. We planed and executed everything. Money was raised by sending donation requests to friendly corporations. We produced and sold lots of goods, such as T-shirts, school bags, sweaters, stationaries. We used the profits generated by those sales to subsidize our projects, like Union Festival, Joint-school Summer Program. We invented a new activity called the Wah Yan Festival, to explore and share the so-called Wah Yan spirit. It comprised of a corridor exhibition of the early history of Wah Yan and a hall exhibition of treasures of artistic or memorial value collected by teachers of Wah Yan and on loan to the Students' Association. It was not uncommon for us to live at the Students' Association headquarter before or during a big event. We knew all the secret passages in the campus. Did the Jesuit Fathers who lived in Wah Yan know that we were climbing the gates or squandering the corridors at mid-night? I guess they know. Were they worried? Perhaps. But they trusted us and loved us so much that they were willing to leave us alone so that we may learn the precious lesson of maturity and responsibility, which could only be learnt in an environment of a high degree of autonomy. In freedom and trust, we discover and embrace self-motivation and collective accountability.

12. I became a journalist in 1989, after I completed a master of law degree in London. Six years later, I joined Ming Pao, a Chinese newspaper founded in 1959 by my favorite Kung fu novel writer Mr Louis Cha, better known as "金庸". I had the honor to follow his foot path in writing editorials for the paper. As you might know, newspaper editorials tend to follow headline news of the day. So if the headline was about education, I had to write a piece of commentary on education. In the year 2000, education reform was a hot topic. Of the many issues in the reform package, direct subsidy scheme(DSS) was of great concern to middle class families, a main trunk of our readership. Most of the traditional famous schools, the 30 to 40 elitist schools which generated most of the university entrants, were eager to join the DSS. They could have complete freedom to select and admit students. No more government allocation based on school district's lucky draw. They could set their own curriculum and chose their medium of instruction. They could maintain their elite education and excellent public exam track record and attract the best students forever, while retaining the same amount of government grant per student in a subsidized school. It was like having the benefits of both worlds. How could Wah Yan resist such a tempting offer?

13. Wah Yan was not on the list of applicants for DSS. I was eager to find out why. I paid a visit to Father Deignan, the Wah Yan College Kowloon Principal during my days. I met him at Ricci Hall. He told me the vision of the founders of Wah Yan was to give quality education to children from grassroots families. That was why they chose Yau Ma Tei as the location of the school. Students were brought to school by their parents who were vegetable or fish hawkers or taxi drivers. Nothing delighted the teachers more by seeing how these students climbed up the social ladder and improved the living condition of their family members. If Wah Yan go DSS, it would inevitably become a school for the middle class or even rich families. Even if scholarships were available, grassroots families would not dare to send their children to Wah Yan. Therefore, going DSS was against Way Yan's core value and mission. At that time, I was not entirely sure if Fr Deignan was right in his predicted class-changing effect of DSS. Now we all know that it is true.

14. Wah Yan was given the choice to go DSS and remain elitist. It decided to remain a normal subsidy school in order to continue serving kids from all walks of life. The more I reflect on this decision, the more empathy and pride I feel inside my heart towards my alma mater. Like Wah Yan, we are free to choose the core value and mission of our life. That takes priority over all other things. We willingly pay a price for it. We devote our time, our energy, our sweat and sometimes, our blood. That was how I sustain a quarter century of devotion in journalism. We in the media act for the public's right to know. The Jesuits and their teachers act for the public's right to enlightenment. I learn to keep my devotion in freedom and in responsibility, just like the Wah Yan founders treated their devotion.