

February 9, 2009

A Dream Coming True

Good morning, Father Li, Principal Mr. Kung, teachers and students. I hope some of you still remember what I talked about 4 months ago. Yes, on 29 September last year, I started with the word **October** and the adoption of the Gregorian Calendar in Europe in the year 1582. Remember? That was the year with 10 missing days in October. Then I told you about Matteo Ricci, the Italian priest who came to China and became the most respected western scholar in China during the time. I also talked about the 2008 Olympics, and how the organization of the event in Beijing signified the desire and efforts of China to be “on the same track with the modern world”. In fact, many people have described the Beijing Olympics “a century old dream come true”.

In Hong Kong, we were in a high mood during the Olympics last August. We were thrilled by the splendid opening ceremony. We were very excited when China fetched one gold medal after the other. At the end, apart from the 51 gold medals China had got, we were proud because the world had recognized the achievement of Beijing for holding the best-organized Olympics ever. China has proved to the world that she is one among the top league in the international community.

However, this is not something we should take for granted. Remember? About 100 years ago in 1900, when the most powerful nations of the world gathered in Beijing, it was the invasion by the Eight-Nation Alliance (八國聯軍之役). Interestingly enough, the eight countries of the Alliance were also the countries on the top of the medal list in the Beijing Olympics. Back in 1900, China was in a state of deep humiliation under the threat of not just the western powers but also Japan, a small island state in Asia. So, in the past 2-3 centuries, China was at a loss as to whether she should succumb to the influence of the west or cling even closer to her own culture and tradition, and resist the material as well as cultural shock waves from the west.

Last time, I introduced to you a book called “*1587, A Year of No Significance*”. This time I wish to introduce another book to you: “*West Waves: A Memoir of Chiang Manglin*”, the Chinese edition titled 《西潮—蔣夢麟回憶錄》. Chiang was born in 1886 in China. He studied in the US. Later, he was the president of the Beijing University for 15 years. This book covers the 100 years history of China starting from 1842. The first half of the 100 years covered was history “learnt” by the author, and the second half, history actually experienced by himself. You know what? The year 1842 was of some significance to Hong Kong. This was the year of the signing of the Treaty of Nanking (or the Treaty of Nanjing, 南京條約), which opened up five ports in the Chinese coast and also gave Hong Kong to the British. In the first

Chapter of this book, “The Coming of the Westerly Winds (西風東漸)”, Chiang noted that it was a turning point in history. I then recall that the visit of those Jesuit priests, particularly Matteo Ricci, represented the first wave of influence from the west. And they had a profound impact on China.

In his book, Chiang also spent some time analysing Japan, as to why and how this small island state had embraced and made use of those westerly winds and became very powerful and ambitious. Japan had the desire not just to conquer China but also to rule the whole of East Asia. In contrast, while the new knowledge and inventions from Europe brought by Matteo Ricci were well recognized by the Ming emperor and officials in the 17th century, China had great difficulty in the history of understanding, accommodating and making use of those westerly winds in the centuries that followed. The situation was particularly worsened in the late Ching Dynasty when the westerly winds were blowing towards China together with military threat. So, the 100 years of history in Chiang’s book was a period in which China was under great threat and turmoil. Outside China, this was also a period in which the world order underwent dramatic changes, a period in which world civilizations clashed and created great waves.

This morning is not the occasion for discussing these very heavy subjects: **fear, hope, and change**. But if you are interested, you may come to the library to find books, or go to the internet to search relevant materials on them.

The theme of the Reading Week this year is “**on the same track with the modern world**”. Not long ago, Premier Wen Jiabao spoke in a forum in Cambridge University, stated that “China was both an old and new nation,” i.e., China has a few thousand years of history, yet the People’s Republic of China would only be 60 years old this year. Quoting the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the Premier also made some remarks about China being on the same track with the world. **He emphasized that China didn't intend to become a “superpower”. Instead, China would respect the views of other countries, maintain an open and peaceful attitude in dealing with different opinions.** And that China would work hard to fulfil the obligations expected of a major global player in areas requiring international cooperation, such as climate change, combat against poverty, terrorism and pandemic diseases.

I consider **Premier Wen’s reference to modesty and openness, and diligence to fulfil obligations are of relevance to us, as teachers and students, at a personal level, if we want to be “on the same track with the world”**.

Dear fellows, shouldn't we remind ourselves that there is so much we can and should still learn. Shouldn't we develop an interest, or a passion, as mentioned by Ms White last week, on the many spheres of subjects that trigger our curiosity, not just in

the confines of text books? Good grades in school and in public examinations are, of course, important. But, I would appeal to those of you who do have good grades not to be complacent. In every subject, there are always some interesting connections, though sometimes hidden, and intricacies in things that you know or you think you know, or actually, you don't know. ^_^ **Read more books! The more you read, the more you like to read. Books, like a stairway or a ladder, will bring you to higher ground. And being on higher ground means you can see a wider horizon, from which you can decide on what and where to see more.**

“Work hard”: this sounds very motherly. Yes, it is. Perhaps down in our hearts, there is always the question: why work so hard if it doesn't make much of a difference? Well, I'd say it does! In the past 200 years or so, the governments and nations of Japan and US worked very hard. The two nations quickly surpassed China. Today, they still are ahead of China in many aspects.

Hong Kong has long been at the intersection between Chinese and western cultures, a bridge between China and the world. We are in a perfect position to contribute to China in the role of a major global player. As one who lives in Hong Kong, I would say that **the opportunity cost for not working hard is very high.**

I have used the word “motherly” on the advice to urge you to work hard. I'd like to tell a story about the mother of a now very famous man. In his book *“The Dream from My Father”*, Barack Obama mentioned when he was a little boy in Indonesia, his mother was concerned that he was not working hard enough in school. So she decided to give little Obama private tuition. The tuition had to start at 4 in the morning as the mother needed to go to work during day time. Imagine, little Obama waking up at 4 am every day to study!! He complained to his mother that it was too hard. His mother said it was, but added that it was very hard for her, too. With this motherly advice, little Obama did not resist the tuition any more. I think this little childhood story has proven that some motherly advice is fit somehow.

Of course, coming to the school library and getting a book to read is nothing compared with waking up at 4 in the morning to study. Still, I'd like to take this opportunity to encourage you all to visit the library more often. For China, the Beijing Olympics was a dream came true. For many people in the US and the world, the election of an African-American US President was also a dream came true. I have a modest dream: I hope all of you would start develop a reading habit even though I know I don't have the time of a hundred years to see my dream come true. **But, why not dream?!** Thank you.

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