

# **Understanding, Adaptation, Innovation, and Contribution**

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**Remarks on Appointment as Vice Chancellor  
of NYU Shanghai**

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Thirty-two years ago, China began a process of development that is without precedent in human history. That development liberated the productive energies of a billion people, and it fueled an astonishing improvement in the quality of human life around the world.

The process of reform and opening up to the world signaled a determination by China to play a leading role in the dynamic global system through which best practices are continuously improved.

Anyone who wants to help improve global best practices must go through a sequence of four steps:

- First is understanding (learning what global best practices are at a given moment in time),
- Second is adaptation (thinking through how those best practices need to be adapted to work in a local cultural context),
- Third is innovation (improving on the state of the art), and
- Fourth is contribution (sharing those improvements back with the rest of the world).

Exactly five years ago, a visionary leader of Peking University, Vice President Hai Wen, invited me to work with him to improve legal education in China. He asked me to help him create a new kind of law school on Beida's Shenzhen campus, where we could understand global best

practices in legal education and then adapt, innovate, and contribute back to China and the world.

I accepted Hai Wen's invitation and moved my home to Shenzhen. We launched the Peking University School of Transnational Law, which we call "STL," and it has been successful beyond our wildest dreams. It improved upon the legal education I knew in America. It attracted the very best students in China and the best professors from overseas, and when the first class graduates this June they will be ready to make a transformative difference to the world of law.

Today another group of visionary leaders has invited me to help them improve higher education more generally.

NYU Shanghai will be a comprehensive research university that offers its undergraduate students a true liberal arts and sciences education. We understand that, over the past two centuries, this kind of university has been developed most fully in America. NYU Shanghai will adapt that example to China, and innovate beyond it, developing a new vision of liberal education that is appropriate to our globally interdependent twenty-first century. We will combine east and west in new ways, because in this century those who lead best will be those who know how to work in true multicultural partnerships.

Moreover, the innovation will go beyond a new vision of liberal education. NYU Shanghai will also be a key point of entry into the larger global network that New York University is creating. Our students will migrate through the network – to the comprehensive campuses in New York and Abu Dhabi, and to any of the 13 study-away sites located around the world. Conversely, students from New York and Abu Dhabi will come and spend time with us in Shanghai. They will understand the significance of the world's most important cities in ways that no other students can. They will prepare themselves for leadership in a world that desperately needs them.

This is a thrilling opportunity for me. I want to express my gratitude to the many people and organizations who have made it possible.

I must begin by thanking China, for welcoming me into her midst with a warmth and generosity of spirit that I never could have anticipated.

I next want to thank the leaders of the city of Shanghai, the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, and the district of Pudong. These leaders brought the concept of NYU Shanghai to New York in 2009, and in the three years of its development they have been unwavering in their commitment to the project.

I want to thank the leaders of East China Normal University, most especially President Yu Lizhong and Vice President Chen Qun. It has been my privilege to meet university leaders all over the world, and I have never met two men with more intellectual energy and a stronger innovative commitment than President Yu and President Chen.

I of course want to thank the leaders of New York University, most especially President John Sexton, Provost Dave McLaughlin, and Associate Vice Chancellor May Lee. I have known John for two decades, and I have known Dave and May for two years. All three of them are gifted, inspirational individuals. NYU's global network is the boldest, most important development in contemporary higher education. It is truly an honor to become a part of it.

Finally, I want to thank Peking University, and the community of students, staff, and faculty at STL, for proving that everything is possible here in China. I have already mentioned Hai Wen, and I also want to mention the school's two other co-founders – Associate Dean Stephen Yandle and Assistant Dean Xu Hua. This evening all three of them, as well as Stephen's wife Martha Anne, are here to mark this special moment. Their presence symbolizes the opportunity that we will have for NYU Shanghai and the Peking University Shenzhen Graduate School to be partners in innovation for Chinese higher education.

I want everyone here to know that I will give NYU Shanghai my very best. I will do all that I can to make NYU Shanghai a beacon for higher education, an example of how globalization has created thrilling new possibilities for academic excellence. Here in this remarkable city we will transform the world's understanding of what a great university

should look like. We will give the world's most talented students an unparalleled opportunity to develop their talents and their values, so that they can contribute to the improvement of our world and to the solution of our planet's most difficult problems.

To fulfill our shared ambitions for NYU Shanghai, we will need the help of everyone in this room. We invited you here this evening because each of you has participated in this four-step process of understanding, adaptation, innovation, and contribution. You understand how, to be successful, these processes cannot be the work of a handful of people. They require us to tap the energy and insights of the broadest community of thinkers we can touch.

We need your best ideas about what the world's best students will need to learn if they are to lead us all forward to a bright and harmonious future. We need your best ideas about how this university can, as an institution, make a vital difference to the progress of Shanghai, of China, and of the entire world.

So please allow me to leave you all with a question. NYU Shanghai, this revolutionary institution, this brilliant new source of energy: how do you imagine it might transform this city, this country, and the world of higher education? What is your dream?

As you think about this question, please let your imaginations soar. And then email your reflections to me at [jeffrey.lehman@nyu.edu](mailto:jeffrey.lehman@nyu.edu). I will be enormously grateful for your help.

Thank you, and good night.