

A Bilingual Optimistic Heart

Jeffrey S. Lehman
July 20, 2013

Thank you all for being here this afternoon.

Today marks the publication of the Chinese-English bilingual edition of my book, *An Optimistic Heart*. I would like to express my profound thanks to everyone at New Oriental Education and Technology Group, at Beijing Sons of China Culture Development Company, and at Beijing Language Studies University Press. Today is my first chance to see the final book, and I am overwhelmed by how beautifully it has been designed, and the craftsmanship that went into the publication. The quality of your work makes my words seem better than they really are.

I thought that this afternoon I might share three sets of personal reflections with you –

First, some reflections on universities, and on the topics that I discuss in the first fourteen chapters of the book;

Second, some reflections on translation, and what it means to me to have had this book translated into Chinese;

And third, some reflections on speaking, and on the analysis of speaking that I present in the book's final chapter.

This is a book about universities. Those of us who live and work at great universities often say that they do three things – they teach, they conduct research, and they provide public service. In the book, I divide university functions into just two categories: I speak of what great universities give their students, and what they give the world (through research and service).

The first five chapters of the book are addressed to students. They are speeches to students at the beginning and end of their university studies. They explore different qualities that I hope students develop during their college years – an ability to hold different perspectives on an

issue in your mind at the same time, a reverence for words, solidarity with other people, a commitment to engage with people who disagree, curiosity, patience, and optimism. Each speech takes one or two of these qualities and discusses them with the help of examples from literature or popular culture.

The middle four chapters are speeches to the governing stakeholders of Cornell University – its faculty and its trustees. They concern the features that make universities in general – and Cornell in particular – so unique and so precious.

And then the next five chapters are speeches to larger, more public audiences. They concern the ways that universities at the beginning of the twentieth century can contribute to humanity's struggle with five different challenges: globalization, racial integration, life in the age of the genome, wisdom in the age of digital information, and sustainability in the age of global development. I suggest that each of these challenges is important and exciting because it is not easy. And I suggest that universities can make important contributions to them because universities do not use just one intellectual tool. Universities are places where the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences can all be found side by side. I suggest that we are likely to make the biggest breakthroughs when we use several academic disciplines to approach an issue, rather than only one.

These fourteen speeches were first published five years ago, and I actually wrote and presented them eight, nine, even ten years ago. So before speaking to you today, I thought I should go back and ask myself whether I still feel the same way about these fourteen topics as I did then. And, much to my surprise, the answer is essentially yes.

I remain very enthusiastic about the first five chapters, the chapters addressed to students. In fact, I still feel that the third chapter, called *Dirt*, is the best speech I have ever written.

I feel almost as good about the last five chapters. They are all a little bit out of date, because we have learned a lot more over the past decade about globalization, integration, the life sciences, data science, and sustainability. But I continue to feel that these are crucial areas for human life in the twenty-first century. And I continue to feel that universities can make important contributions to these areas, especially inter-

disciplinary contributions.

If I would make changes, I think they would probably be to the middle four chapters – about the university. I don't feel ashamed of anything I say in those chapters. In fact, looked at as a speech the sixth chapter is the second-best speech in the book. But if I were talking about these topics today I would definitely speak and write differently. I would talk a lot more about the tuition cost of private universities in America, and about the need to make changes in how universities operate in order to reduce those costs.

What makes today so exciting for me, however, is not the speeches themselves. What makes today exciting is the development of the speeches from this book ... to this book. What makes today so exciting is the fact that a reader can now read them in English and in Chinese, side by side.

As all of you know, I have been living in China for the past five years – first in Shenzhen and now in Shanghai. As an intellectual matter, I firmly believe that the world's future will be led by a partnership between the U.S. and China, between Chinese people and Americans. As an emotional matter, these five years have given me the chance to fall in love with China and the Chinese people. I have committed this portion of my life to helping bind these two countries closer and closer together, mostly by helping to draw the universities of these two countries closer and closer together.

One of the many great Chinese miracles of the past three decades has been China's emergence as a bilingual nation. The ability of today's Chinese teenagers to speak English is breathtaking, and it enables someone like me who does not speak Chinese to connect and communicate effectively.

But even if one is good at a second language, it is much more difficult to read it than it is to read your native tongue. And so, if I want to reach Chinese readers as effectively as I reach American readers, I need to have my texts translated.

And here I simply could not have been more fortunate. One of the most important reasons for the Chinese bilingual miracle I described a moment ago is New Oriental. No company has done more to create a

bilingual China than New Oriental; no person has done more than Yu Minhong. Simply having the company's name on the book gives it a level of importance that nothing else possibly could have done.

But Yu Minhong and New Oriental did much, much more than just put their name on the book. They invested in outstanding translation. And they invested in side-by-side presentation.

Translation is hard. It is difficult to translate meaning precisely, to ensure that subtleties of meaning are preserved between two languages. But it is even more difficult to translate both meaning and emotion, to preserve not only the message within the words but also the feelings behind the words. My bilingual Chinese friends who have read the translations in this book say that those translations are absolutely superb. They really do evoke the same kind of emotional response within a Chinese reader that the English words evoke in an American reader.

At this point I truly must thank my friend and colleague Liya Rong, who took full responsibility for the translation. It was Liya who assembled the team of gifted translators to do the work, and it was Liya who developed a process of revisions that served to make the translations the best that they could be.

But New Oriental did not stop with an excellent translation. They could have chosen simply to publish the Chinese version of the book. Instead, they doubled the number of pages in the book by including both Chinese and English, side by side.

This decision means that the book is not only accessible to Chinese readers. It also means that the book itself can help those readers to strengthen their English. For a man who wants to help draw Chinese and Americans closer together, this is truly a dream come true.

Finally, I would like to say a few words about the last chapter in this book, which is about the craft of giving speeches. Each of the first fourteen chapters is a talk. The fifteenth chapter talks about giving a talk. Now I would like to talk with you about, talking about, giving a talk.

The fifteenth chapter was hard to write. I had to go back and analyze what I had done in each of the first fourteen. I had to be critical of

myself. I had to write down the things that I had done that had not worked. I had to try to understand why I made mistakes, and rather than covering those things up, I had to expose them to my readers.

Of course, there were aspects of writing that chapter that were very enjoyable. I had the chance to re-live some moments that had been very satisfying. I had the chance to think about why those things had happened, so that others could make use of my own experiences in their own lives.

Of course, these aspects of writing that chapter – the good parts and the bad parts – apply with equal force to the work of any professor. When we do research, and when we prepare a class for students, we have to be relentlessly self-critical. We have to use all of our energies to think about our own mistakes, and to express clearly the limitations of our work. But we do it – and we are so very happy to do it – because we think that doing so might somehow be a benefit to our audience. We imagine that our work might somehow be a gift ... to our students, or to the world.

So now, five years later, how do I feel about this chapter? Overall, I feel pretty good. The chapter offers twelve guidelines for making speeches, especially for making speeches to students. I think that they are pretty good. I would like to take the opportunity to read two of those twelve guidelines to you now:

“2. Discuss one or two works of literature. I am fond of the presidential speech that charts an indirect route to its destination, a route that passes by way of an encounter with great literature. The route provides an unstated argument for the importance of fiction, and in my experience it engages the audience more deeply than a speech that moves back and forth between syllogistic reasoning and snippets of quotation from famous thinkers.”

And then:

“7. Read full passages. Speakers are, I think, sometimes too reticent about reading extended passages from another’s work. But in my experience, adult audiences enjoy being read to, whether it is an extended block of verse from

Toni Morrison or a passage of prose from E.B. White. It gives them a refreshing opportunity to listen to an authorial voice other than the speaker's. And it gives the speaker an opportunity to vary everything from cadence to accent, in shifting from his or her own language to the quotation of someone else. A long quotation gives the listeners a chance to become accustomed to that author's voice before they are required to switch back to yours."

So, there! I just had a chance to read you a full passage about reading full passages!

But what do I wish now that I had done differently in that last chapter? I wish that I had taken one step further back, and spoken at a more general level about why some of these speeches fly higher than others. Why do some – like "Dirt" and "Revolutionary and Beloved" – feel so much more thrilling than others – like "An Inquiring and Open Mind" and "Flying West"?

I think the answer is this. I think that if a speech is going to touch the sky, the speaker has to feel three emotions about the audience. The speaker has to respect the audience. The speaker has to like the audience. The speaker has to trust the audience. If any of those three things are even a little bit weak, the speech can be good but not great. If all three are present, then magic can happen.

Respect the audience, like the audience, trust the audience. I must say that I have never spoken to an audience I respect, like, and trust more than the people in this room today.

This room is filled with people of enormous professional achievement, some of whom you have heard speak this afternoon. I have learned an enormous amount from them and their work, and I am deeply honored they have taken time away from enormously busy lives to be here on this occasion.

And I really like these people. They have been true friends to me, showing me kindnesses they did not have to show me, expecting absolutely nothing in return. In my next book of speeches, A Transnational Soul, I will include a little speech I gave about friendship, and about the friendship that has been shown to me these past five years. I

want all of you to know, however, that I have never seen a country with people more willing to show friendship to a foreigner than China has been towards me.

And finally, there is the matter of trust. Standing up and giving a speech to a group of strangers is, in an objective sense, a risky thing to do. It is almost like taking your clothes off on stage. You risk saying things that will make the audience laugh at you, or think you are not very smart.

But if you focus on those risks, you will be too cautious. You may protect yourself from humiliation, but you will also deprive yourself of the chance to do something creative, something innovative, something that can make a real difference in people's lives. Innovation requires bravery, and nothing supports bravery more than a feeling that one can trust one's audience.

And so, my friends, whom I respect, I like, and I trust, I hope you enjoy the book – both my own original contributions, and also the craftsmanship that was devoted to its translation and to its printing. If you have comments or questions, I always welcome them, and it is easy to send them to me through my web site. Last night, while I was writing these remarks, I received an email from an English teacher in China who had a question about a sentence I used in an address I gave in Shenzhen two summers ago. I was happy to answer his question, and I would be happy to answer your email questions as well. We'll have an opportunity for Q&A after we hear from President Zhou.

Thank you all for being here today.