

# A late graduation

## Out of the Box

Tony Chan Fan-cheong is president of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. He has spent his life pursuing his dreams relating to teaching and research, and has unique views on education, scientific and technological development, and nurturing the young.



**MANY OF US** know or are active users of social networking site Facebook. Founder Mark Zuckerberg dropped out from Harvard so that he could concentrate on developing the website – and the rest is history.

Last month, Zuckerberg returned to Harvard's campus to receive his honorary doctorate, and a "graduation certificate" that was 13 years late.

He was invited as the commencement speaker and his speech soon went viral over the internet.

Zuckerberg first recalled humorously how he met KX.Jin at Harvard on the first day of school. He was wearing his shirt inside out, but nobody except Jin told him about it. The two would go on to become friends.

Today, Jin is "a big part of Facebook," said Zuckerberg, using this as an example to poke fun at the new graduates: "And that, Class of 2017, is why you should be nice to people."

Facebook was first developed as a networking website for the Harvard community, but Zuckerberg

always had bigger dreams. He wanted to connect more people across the globe. "The challenge for our generation is creating a world where everyone has a sense of purpose," he said.

Once one has a purpose, Zuckerberg said, one needs to act to take the initiative. "A change in the world that seems so clear you're sure someone else will do it. But they won't. You will." Advances in the world often come from the most unexpected directions. As I often tell my students, they may not succeed even if they try, but they would surely fail if they do not.

The rise of Facebook, obviously, was not a fairy tale. There was a time when big corporations approached him and offered a massive buyout, and Zuckerberg soon found himself alone as most of his team, who would rather cash instead of chasing a bigger dream, left him behind. That episode made him a stronger person, and he encouraged the graduates present to keep pushing the envelope and never stop trying.

"In our society, we often don't do big things because we're so afraid of making mistakes that we ignore all the things wrong today if we do nothing. But that can't keep us from starting ... an entrepreneurial culture thrives when it's easy to try lots of new ideas."

I have seen many in Hong Kong who are deterred by the fear of mistakes and ended up stifling their creativity and innovative ideas. The truth is that excellence cannot be achieved without failing, just like the great JK Rowling, creator of *Harry Potter*, was rejected 12 times by various publishers before she caught her break.

As much as the world thought Zuckerberg was one of a kind to be able to found Facebook, his success would not have been possible without hard work. "Ideas don't come out fully formed. They only become clear as you work on them. You just have to get started," he said. "The idea of a single eureka moment is a dangerous lie. It makes us feel inadequate since we haven't had ours. It prevents people with seeds of good ideas from getting started." Are youngsters in Hong Kong ready to get started with their ideas?

Now, as a man of stature, Zuckerberg is eager to preach to all in the world that they, too, have to be willing to take a chance to change the world.

"This is the struggle of our time. The forces of freedom, openness, and global community against the forces of authoritarianism, isolationism, and nationalism. Forces for the flow of knowledge, trade, and immigration against those who would slow them down. This is not a battle of nations; it's a battle of ideas ... Change starts local. Even global changes start small, with people like us. In our generation, the struggle of whether we connect more, whether we achieve our biggest opportunities, comes down to this: your ability to build communities and create a world where every single person has a sense of purpose."

I found it to be truly astounding that such words of wisdom would come from someone who is less than half of my age. Can our society groom our next generation of leaders to think as deeply and thoughtfully as he does? This is a question for us all.