Yes, it was 50 years ago when I was studying at secondary school in Hong Kong. I was living very near the University, and during weekends I would sneak into the table tennis room on the ground floor of Loke Yew Hall for a few games with my friends.

We would then proceed to the Lily Pond, lie down on the grass lawn under one of the willow trees and gaze towards the harbour (yes, we could see the harbour from the Lily Pond in those days) and the distant hills (yes, no pollution at all).

Every now and then, I would see some elegant people walking down along the University path, looking like the high gods of Olympus, and I said to myself: “One day, I am going to become one of them.”

Many years later, I became a Chair Professor at this University. The road to this honour had not been easy, but most gratifying.
When I joined the medical school of my alma mater in 1973, I was expected to become a good surgeon, and research was regarded only as an incidental personal interest. For indeed it was mesmerising to be able to perform the most difficult operations, to invent new procedures, or to detect obscure diseases.

But having done good clinical work, all of us would also like to “show it off” at international meetings—not just for ourselves, but also for the University, and for Hong Kong. I began to perform animal experiments in the mid 70s and this was regarded as quite advanced for a clinical teacher in Hong Kong.

When I further developed my laboratory to handle histology, electron-microscopy, electrophysiology and tissue banking, my academic status became consolidated, not only at this University, but also in the region and internationally.

But alas, the past ten years or so have been quite trying for all clinical teachers as we were expected to metamorphose into molecular and genetic scientists also. This has not been helped by the additional burden of administrative duties loaded on all teachers, resulting from the different assessment exercises from the University Grants Committee (UGC) and other authorities. In my own case, taking up the Deanship, and then the Pro-Vice-Chancellorship*, resulted in a substantial change of my career pathway, the former post proving most rewarding, but rather disturbing for the latter.

What happened to me during the past forty years reflects what happened to our University as a whole, evolving from a tertiary teaching institution to a research-led university, and from regional prominence to international excellence. This again is a condensed reflection of the historical development of universities throughout the whole world in the past nine hundred years.

The earliest university models were founded during the medieval period in the twelfth century Italy and France. Under the influence of Christianity, scholars learnt Latin and travelled extensively to different parts of Europe to be entertained and to gain a “global” perspective.

* Dean of Medicine (1995-1998); Pro-Vice-Chancellor (2000-2001)

Every now and then, I would see some elegant people walking down along the University path, looking like the high gods of Olympus, and I said to myself: “One day, I am going to become one of them.”
This model lasted several centuries, only momentarily interrupted by Napoleon with the introduction of some “Nationalistic features”. John H Cardinal Newman (Oxford 1852) stressed that the “Idea of a University” must be centralised on “Liberal Education” for “character formation” of its students.

However, by the end of the nineteenth century, Humboldt and Althoff of Germany proclaimed that universities were places not only for transmission of knowledge, but also for the creation of knowledge, and established centres of research at universities. This concept was echoed in North America by A Flexner (1930) who envisioned universities as an “organism” combining education and research.

After the Second World War, the American model of universities rapidly became the standard, with undergraduate education along the British line of Liberal Studies and postgraduate studies along the German line of research and vocational training.

Research also became increasingly linked to the community as resources were in abundance outside universities. Clarke Kerr in “The Use of Universities” stated that American universities should go beyond liberal studies and technology development and integrate with community. The term “Multiversity” was created.

With the arrival of the twenty-first century, integration with the community is no longer adequate as globalisation, a clash of civilisations, the even larger environmental issues, and the more basic question of sustainability are posing new challenges to universities. Paul Kennedy in his “Preparing for the Twenty-first Century” perceived that the new challenge was a race between education and disaster, and university education may be the most important.

To rise up to this challenge, almost all great universities have to re-examine the following important issues:

- Vision vs expected role
- Traditional strength vs future developments
- Globalisation vs local relevance
- Teaching vs research vs service
- Knowledge vs character formation
- Elitist approach vs grass-roots approach

Faced with such global movements and the rapid emergence of China on the international stage, this University has to re-examine its position.
The University of Hong Kong was established ninety-six years ago to serve Hong Kong and China. This it has indeed done so admirably, mainly in the domain of the economic growth of Hong Kong and indirectly transforming the economy of China. Hong Kong’s role as the financial hub of this region has to continue.

In the future, however, I wish that Hong Kong, together with the surrounding region and with the wisdom of the international community, can solve our environmental problems and transform South China into the “Chinese Riviera”. In doing so, it has to reach deep into the basic issues of sustainability, of humans being part of nature, and of harmonising the human heart with the rhythm of nature. Thus, Hong Kong has to rise to the call at the cultural level and ensure an environment conducive to the interaction of East and West.

True globalisation means the understanding of different cultures and then going beyond them, sometimes a rather painful process for the individual and the nation. Those of our generation who had gone through Confucianism, Christianity, the Beatles, existentialism, democracy, and then back to Oriental wisdom will fully understand this.

The University of Hong Kong should be able to play a pivotal role in such historical and geographical encounters and develop a “habitual vision of greatness” as advocated by Whitehead. Almost all the great universities recognise this. Harvard, for example, has recently just come short of “requiring” all students to have a year’s international experience by declaring that it is “highly desirable”. It is because of this reason that our University must strengthen its liberal studies in our undergraduate education.

The “3+3+4” new curriculum reform will provide an unprecedented opportunity to ensure that students from the science stream will be exposed to the arts and humanities—and vice-versa.

In each of the subject disciplines, broader issues have to be brought in and more elective modules should be built in to allow flexibility for diversity. For instance, in the area of medicine that I am most familiar with, the revision of the mission statement in 1996 introduced the concept of “health” rather than concentrating only on “medical problems”. This had led to the inclusion of the School of Chinese Medicine in the Medical Faculty.

The curriculum reform in 1997 also created a breathing space for student’s individual needs. I am sure this spirit will find its different forms in different faculties.
On the other hand, to ensure that these could be successfully achieved, we have to face the dilemma that our strengths in the science and professional disciplines must remain world-class as the present resource and funding model in Hong Kong is heavily tilted towards such more “tangible” areas. In the long run, however, I am optimistic that community resources in support of the arts and humanities will play a more significant role. The success of our Centre for Buddhist Studies is a good example.

I hope our government will have the wisdom to realise what D Bell stated, that “the quality of the university reveals the quality of its society, and also predicts a society’s potential and development over the next twenty to thirty years”. The wisdom of our University motto: “Sapientia et Virtus” still holds true these days, and will still be our guiding light for the next one hundred years.

I recently bought my retirement residence in Pokfulam, just next to the Sandy Bay University staff quarters. I have become so used to the shouts of the students and the sights of my medical school that they will accompany me for the rest of my days. I also want to witness its future developments and be part of it.

I still remember the silhouette of a senior professor slowly walking down Sassoon road one day during sunset. As I gazed, that figure grew taller and taller until my eyes were blurred with tears. Yes, it is this dedication to wisdom and virtue that is the most beautiful of all things. It will be my fortune and honour to follow in their footsteps.

“And one day when I get really old, a wonderful morning in May, I shall tell you, HKU, I loved you, one day when I was young.”