

Welcome to NYU Shanghai

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New Student Welcoming Ceremony

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Pioneering members of the founding class of students at NYU Shanghai, family members, and friends, on behalf of the faculty of NYU Shanghai, and on behalf of the administrative staff of NYU Shanghai, it is my great honor to share a few words of welcome this morning.

Family members and friends, I hope you will forgive me. For the next few minutes I will be speaking to our students and not to you. I need to tell them what they can expect from their education here at NYU Shanghai. Of course, I do invite you to listen in, since I suspect you might be a little bit curious about what their lives will be like.

NYU Shanghai students, I would like to start with congratulations. Congratulations for your achievement. Congratulations for your good judgment. Congratulations for your courage.

You have achieved something extraordinary in being invited to join this class. More than 5,100 young people from around the world applied for the 300 seats in this class, a ratio of more than 17 to 1. To be selected you had to demonstrate to us, through an exceptionally demanding process, that you are smart, that you work hard, and that you are prepared for the special responsibilities that go with being a member of this academic community. Congratulations.

You have demonstrated extraordinarily good judgment in choosing to be here. While most of the students we admitted to NYU Shanghai accepted our invitation, about 200 decided to go elsewhere. You will remember that during our admissions process we emphasized that students should go elsewhere if they have any doubts about whether they are a good fit for NYU Shanghai. That is the decision those students made, and we wish them well. At the same time, you should know that in deciding to accept our offer you showed excellent judgment. By coming

here you have committed yourself to a process of personal growth and transformation that you could not have accomplished as well at any other university, a process that will create special opportunities for you throughout your adult lives. Congratulations.

Finally, by choosing to be here today you have shown courage. It is not easy to be a pioneer. It is not easy to turn down opportunities to attend institutions that others have dreamed of attending their whole lives – institutions that have well deserved reputations for excellence. It is not easy to commit yourself to helping to build a new institution from scratch, to bet on a set of possibilities that are not guaranteed. It takes courage, the same kind of courage that is required to be an innovator in society, the same kind of courage that fuels success in almost any human endeavor. Congratulations.

As a reward for your achievement, your good judgment, and your courage, you will receive a truly unique education. In some ways it will resemble education that you have received before. In some ways it will resemble education that your friends receive at other universities. But mostly it will be different. The path to success here is very different from the path to success at other universities.

It is a very wide path, wide enough for you all to walk down it together. Indeed, you have to walk down it together; it is not a path that you can walk alone. And it is a different path -- if you try to walk in the way that your friends are walking at other universities, including at other parts of NYU, you will get lost. Most of the most important opportunities and challenges you will face here are unique to NYU Shanghai.

That is why we have created this three-week-long period of welcome and orientation before classes begin. I believe it is the longest such period at any university, and every minute of it will matter, as you ready yourselves for your collective journey.

I want now to take a few minutes to describe the education you will receive during your four years as NYU Shanghai students. Some of what I am about to say may be surprising, but I hope not too surprising. But I want you to pay close attention, because what I say may help you to make sense of what you will be experiencing in the months to come.

What are we trying to accomplish here, as your teachers at NYU Shanghai? I think it is important for me first to emphasize what we are not trying to accomplish. Our goal is not to give you our wisdom. It is not to provide you with our knowledge. It is not to show you the answers.

People who create, people who innovate, and people who lead cannot do any of those things by memorizing other people's answers. Creators, innovators, and leaders master the skills of developing new, fundamentally important questions, questions that carry their own answers. Creators, innovators, and leaders master the skills of developing new, better answers to old questions. And they master the skills of recognizing when the old answers are no longer correct, because the world has changed.

As your teachers, our goal is to help you master those skills. We want to help you become skillful learners, the kind of adults who are curious about everything and understand how to deepen their understanding of everything. We want to help you become innovative global citizens, the kind of adults who move easily across cultures and are effective within the most diverse communities of people.

To help you develop in this way, we will be bombarding you with difficult questions that do not always have only one right answer. We will be helping you to learn how to develop sophisticated and impressive answers to these questions, at the same time that we are helping you to see that others might give different answers that are equally sophisticated and impressive. And we will also be helping you to recognize that some paths are wrong – that saying something brand new does not make you creative or original if what you say is not also grounded in thoughtfulness, honesty, and intellectual rigor.

Here is a sample question. “When you speak to me, what should you call me?” Vice Chancellor Lehman? President Lehman? Jeff? Professor Lehman? Lei Meng? Lei Meng Xiao Zhang? Lao Lei?

Please understand. This is a question that does not have only one right answer. I do not need or want you all to call me the same thing.

But there are lots of wrong answers. It would be a mistake for you to call me, “Hey, you!” It would be a mistake for you to call me, “Old Man Lehman!”

So here is a potentially disturbing point. Even among the set of possible right answers, it makes a difference what answer you choose. For the choice you make among the right answers will tell me something about you. I will make judgments about you based on how you choose to address me.

Perhaps even more disturbingly, you have to make a choice. If you try to be clever by saying “Hi” and then talking about something, I will notice that you have made that choice, and I will make my judgments accordingly.

Furthermore, the choice you make about what to call me may not help you answer the question what to call Chancellor Yu Lizhong. You see, there is not only one right answer to the question, “What should you call me?” But there may be only one right answer to the question, “What should you call him?” And there may be a different right answer, or set of possible right answers, to the question, “What should you call your mathematics professor?”

Until today your lives may have been devoted to mastering the right answers to questions. Here we will help you learn how to engage questions in an entirely different way: to understand whether they are important or trivial, precise or ambiguous; to identify the kinds of answers that could be right or wrong; to appreciate all the consequences that might follow from choosing one answer rather than another; and ultimately to choose an answer and accept the consequences of your choice.

One of the most important techniques you will master at NYU Shanghai is the ability to answer a question with the words, “It depends.” Every assertion of truth depends on the assumptions one makes about the world. A community is a group of people who share assumptions. Intellectual rigor means being careful to make your assumptions clear, and being thoughtful about what would happen if those assumptions were to change.

In geometry, one can define a community of people to consist of all those people who want to assume that whenever there is a line in a plane, and a point in the same plane that is not on that line, then there is always exactly one line in the plane that passes through that point and never intersects with the original line. This community is one we might call the community of Euclidean geometry.

But there is nothing illegal or immoral or logically inconsistent about making a different assumption. One could also assume that any line we draw through that point will intersect with the original line eventually. We might create a community of people who build a geometry using that alternative assumption, and we could call it the community of Riemannian geometry.

When we answer questions, we almost always have to base our answers on assumptions, and we must almost always understand that those assumptions may or may not be true. In giving our answers, we need to be comfortable with our assumptions, we should have some sense of the likelihood that our assumptions might not be shared by everyone, we should have some sense of how much a different assumption would change our answer, and we should try to be clear about all those things.

Here at NYU Shanghai you will spend many, many hours practicing the skill of saying, “it depends.” It will become second nature to you to say, “It depends on whether you are willing to assume X.” And, “It depends on whether you are willing to assume X, but that is an assumption I am comfortable with.”

So now let’s practice this technique with a real question: “NYU Shanghai’s pioneering class of students will be famous throughout history. They will be known as the Class of X. What number is X?”

I expect many in this room would say X is 2017. I expect many others would say X is 2013. I do not expect anyone would say X is 2015.

This is another question like the first one about what to call me. There are certainly wrong answers. There may be more than one possible right answer. But each of us will have to choose among those possible right answers, and the choice we make will have consequences.

Moreover, as we work towards making a choice, it will be helpful to think about assumptions, and to make frequent use of the words, “It depends.”

So please have a look at the sign behind me. You will see that it is possible to try to avoid making a choice between 2013 and 2017. Looking at the sign, you might say that the value of X depends on whether the words, “Class of X,” are being written in Chinese or in English.

The sign seems to take the approach of saying that when the words are being written in Chinese, we are signaling our membership in the community of Chinese universities, and that community is used to having X be the year you start college, so X would be 2013.

Conversely, the sign also seems to take the approach of saying that when the words are being written in English, we are signaling our membership in the community of New York University, and that community is used to having X be the year you finish your degree, so X would be 2017. (As an aside, I would note that is the custom in all American universities, but it is not the custom in all English-speaking universities; British universities would also say X is 2013.)

But the approach of the sign might not be fully satisfying. It might be very confusing if the phrase “NYU Shanghai Class of 2017” could be referring to all of you and could also be referring to a group of students that arrives in four years, depending on whether you are speaking in English or Chinese.

So what if we have to make a choice between 2013 and 2017? If two different communities have traditionally made two different assumptions, and those different assumptions lead to two different answers, is it possible to choose one without hurting the other community’s feelings? Is it possible to create a new, meta-community, that successfully and respectfully includes people from many different subcommunities, each of which makes its own assumptions about the world that we inhabit?

In the world of globalization, the challenge of harmonizing different cultures that work from different assumptions may be the most important challenge of our time. And NYU Shanghai is designed to help you master the skills that are needed to meet that challenge.

Mastery of these skills will require you resist two impulses that you might naturally feel in the face of a problem like the 2013 – 2017 problem. One impulse that you must resist is the impulse to run away.

So, as you learn how to say, “it depends on your assumptions” in a multicultural environment like this, you may find yourself always tempted to say things like this: “The answer to that depends on your assumptions, different cultures make different assumptions, we respect all cultures equally, so there is nothing more to be said and no answer to be given.”

But that would be running away. It would ignore the essential fact that cultures are not frozen in place – they evolve over time. I am an American. In the 1800’s my culture assumed it was OK for people to own other people as slaves and it was OK to say that the only people who could vote are men. Today those assumptions are no longer a part of my culture. That is because in the intervening years people were prepared to question those assumptions.

Here at NYU Shanghai you will learn to resist the impulse to run away. We have designed our university to maximize the opportunity you have to engage deeply with people from different cultures. You will have the opportunity every day not only to notice that another culture makes different assumptions, but also to explore why it makes those assumptions. You will have the opportunity to discuss whether those assumptions are reasonable. You will learn to do this thoughtfully, in a spirit of tolerance, respect, and mutual appreciation. And ultimately, you might be able to develop a basis for shared perspective and understanding, if not full agreement.

If one dangerous impulse is to run away from the chance to seriously explore the assumptions that underlie a culture, an equally dangerous impulse is to rush towards closure – to declare that one set of assumptions is right and the other is wrong.

The English poet John Keats recognized that whenever people face two conflicting arguments, they naturally seek rapid closure. The conflict creates emotional tension, and it is natural to make that tension go away by deciding which argument is right and which is wrong, which is stronger and which is weaker. Keats wrote admiringly about people who could resist that natural impulse. He wrote about how Shakespeare

could “luxuriate in uncertainties and doubts, entertaining two opposing ideas without irritable reaching after fact and reason.” Keats gave a name to this ability to entertain two opposing ideas “without irritable reaching after fact and reason.” He called it “negative capability.”

Negative capability is an exceptionally powerful tool. By putting yourself into that state, you will truly be able to systematically probe and test out where an argument is vulnerable, and where it is robust.

And this is why you showed such wonderful judgment when you chose to be here. Because the largest national community here is only half the class, each of you has the chance, every day, to spend at least part of the day engaged in serious conversation with someone from another nation. Every day! If you do this every day – if not for the entire day then at least for part of the day – then you will capture the most astonishing benefits of being here. If you fail to do so, then we will have wasted a precious seat in this class.

To gather the benefits of being here you must do this. You must engage. You must commit yourselves fully to being not a Chinese class and an American class and a rest-of-the-world class, but to being one single class. We cannot do this for you, but we can watch and cheer as you do it for yourselves.

By succeeding in this incredible project, by showing how a true meta-community of assumptions can be created out of many sub-communities, by mastering the skills of creators, innovators, and leaders, you, the inaugural class of NYU Shanghai, will earn a certain fame here in China.

In the recent past, pioneering classes at universities in China have become famous. Consider, for example, the Class of 1977. During the cultural revolution, the Gaokao had been suspended and China’s universities were nearly closed. In 1977, the decision was made to offer the Gaokao once again. More than 5 million students applied for 283,000 seats at China’s universities. The ratio was more than 17 to 1.

The so-called Class of 1977 received a precious opportunity that others did not receive. Importantly, that class, which included Premier Li Keqiang, recognized that they had received something precious. They

accepted a responsibility to use that precious gift in lives of leadership and service to others.

And this brings me to my final question of the morning. You, the inaugural class of NYU Shanghai, will have a unique opportunity to develop precious skills, and you will have opportunities to live lives of satisfaction and achievement that others will not have. In return, you will have a responsibility to use your skills to lead and to serve.

My final question is, “A responsibility to lead and to serve whom?”

One possible answer might be, “I will serve China if I am Chinese, America if I am American, France if I am French, etc., etc., because I am patriotic and grateful to my home country.”

One possible answer might be, “I will serve China if I am not Chinese, and America if I am Chinese, because I am grateful to NYU Shanghai for giving me the opportunity to absorb a second culture.”

One possible answer might be, “I will serve all humanity, because my species matters more to me than my nation.”

As with the other questions, there is more than one right answer, and there is also a wrong answer. The wrong answer is, “I only want to serve myself and my family.” But beyond that wrong answer, I hope each of you will talk with your classmates about how you will choose an answer that has consequences you are prepared to accept.

And now, in conclusion, I would like to turn back to the family and friends of our new students. I especially want to say a few words to the parents.

Your children are not the only ones who deserve congratulations. The fact that your children earned the opportunity to attend this remarkable university is a great tribute to you, and you should take enormous pride in their achievement.

The challenge now is to accept the fact that, from now on, your children will be defining their own destinies. They will continue to seek your advice, but they will do so on their own terms.

I have gone through this process myself, with three different children. And I want you to know that, I understand just how hard it can be to give up the sense that you can protect them.

Sometimes during this coming year they will make mistakes that last year you might have been able to talk them out of. They will experience the consequences of those mistakes. And it will sometimes be hard to watch.

But in return you will see your years of labor reach fruition. By making their own choices and accepting the consequences of those choices, your children will emerge as adults whom you admire and respect. They will still need you. They will still want to be around you. But they will also be sturdy and opinionated adults who will want to talk with you about your assumptions, and about whether it might be possible to have different assumptions. They will still learn from you, but at least as often they will teach you things.

And so, to all of you, new students and parents of new students, I extend my heartiest welcome as we all, together, treasure the opportunities that come with our new lives as builders of NYU Shanghai.