

## Worst of Times, Best of Times

Professor Vincent Chang  
03 Jan 2021



Professor Vincent Chang, Vice-Chancellor, Brac University

In the past few months, I have been asked by students like you from my university and other universities: Is our generation unlucky? They made me think of the time when I was at your age. I had read quite a few books during a summer. I shall share with you three of them.

First book, a novel: *A Tale of Two Cities*, by Charles Dickens. The story is set against the backdrop of French Revolution -- chaos and disorders. Old order was gone and new order was still unknown. No wonder Charles Dickens opened the story with such a line: "It was the worst of times."

Second book is in Chinese, also a novel. It is a story about a university's students during WW2. The title, if translated into English, is called *A Song Never to End*. During

WW2, Japan invaded China and occupied Beijing four years before the US declared war against Japan. Right before Japan took Beijing, the three best universities in greater Beijing decided to relocate their universities away from Beijing to Kunming. Some students decided not to leave for a faraway place on the edge of the country, and chose to drop out of the school. However, most students decided to move with their universities. They travelled by trains, buses, boats, and by foot, to cross great plains, high mountains and rapid waters. When they arrived at Kunming, no campus yet, no classroom yet, no lab yet, and no studio yet. The new university was named United University. Each student became a United University student. There was no certain future. Some wondered: Is this the worst of times? Are they an unfortunate generation? In case you are curious, the author of this book was a United University student.

I shall return to talk about these two books later.

The third book is not a novel. It is called *A Study of History* by Arnold Toynbee, a British historian. The theme of the book is: a civilization or an institution does not die from challenges, but from failures of responses to challenges. I call this the framework of “Challenges and Responses”. An institution cannot control where challenges come from and what kind of challenges they are, but it can certainly manage its responses. How it responds to the challenges defines the institution.

This “Challenges and Responses” framework applies not only to civilization and institutions but also to individuals. For example, when you prepare your resumes for an internship or job, you may consider CGPA and club activities are the most important. Why? Because they are the proxies of your IQ (Intelligence Quotient) and your EQ (Emotional Quotient). We know IQ and EQ are important. But perhaps more important is AQ – Adversity Quotient. AQ measures your ability of dealing with adversities in life, of turning obstacles into opportunities.

Why AQ is so important? It is because the reality is that no one has a life of smooth sailing, and you have no control of where challenges come from and what kind of challenges they are. It is also because challenges and obstacles are perhaps our best teachers -- one learns the most by running into failure, setbacks and challenges. In the Silicon Valley in the US, where Google and Facebook and YouTube started, if you have not failed before, the venture capitalists will be less interested in investing in you and your company because they cannot observe your AQ. What are the examples of overcoming failures? Answer: Everywhere, if you look carefully.

Be true to yourself. Find your interest, your calling (note not your parents', not your boyfriend's, not your girlfriend's) and pursue it with passion and discipline. In a university, you can learn to boost your CGPA and in this sense you can improve your IQ. You can participate in and lead clubs to showcase your EQ. However, a university cannot teach you how to improve your AQ. In fact, perhaps no university in the world can because almost all curricula are designed to teach you how to succeed,

and almost none is designed to teach you how to fail. Only in failures can you improve your AQ. So, you had better teach yourself. But how?

First, be true to yourself. Find your interest, your calling (note not your parents', not your boyfriend's, not your girlfriend's) and pursue it with passion and discipline. Find your True North so you will be able to stay on course, regardless how treacherous the oceans and how severe the storms are. Second, be curious about the world. So, you can take a view, which may be different and broader and longer and so you can better manage any challenges and, if necessary, adjust your course forward.

And this is how you improve your AQ: find your calling and pursue with passion and discipline and take a long view and adjust your course (not your goal) if necessary. So, you can have consistent responses to any challenges you may face. In short, your AQ is how you respond to challenges.

It is my wish that 20, 30, or 40 years from now, you could look back at today's pandemic and conclude that it is the beginning of the best of your times.

Now back to the questions: Is your generation simply unlucky? Is this the worst of times? I am going back to continue with the second book *A Song Never to End* and the first book *A Tale of Two Cities*.

To the United University students: no certainty of the future. Kunming might be as dark as a Night. Maybe they were unlucky. Maybe it was the worst of times. But in *A Song Never to End*, a poem written by a student reads: "Ah the night, a whole new day!" He turned a Night into a Day. Two alumni went on to win the Nobel prizes in physics. As for the author of the novel, he eventually earned a PhD from Yale University and became a professor. In fact, many of the United University alumni later became university presidents, professors and thought leaders in the 20<sup>th</sup> century's China. To me, it was the best of times in China's higher education, even though United University existed briefly only until the end of WW2.

What about *A Tale of Two Cities*? Charles Dickens opened the story with the following lines: "It was the best of times. It was the worst of times." And he ended the story with the quote: "It is a far, far better thing that I do than I have ever done." It is indeed the best of times, because in the story, life and love are tested and ultimately elevated.

And this is what I have learned from the three books that I read when I was at your age at university. If there is something that I can share with our students, it would be that I urge you to find your heroes and learn how they overcome their adversities, how they fight against their bad lucks, and how they navigate their unfavourable environments. It is my wish that 20, 30, or 40 years from now, you could look back at today's pandemic and conclude that it is the beginning of the best of your times.

**\* Professor Vincent Chang is Vice-Chancellor, BRAC University**