

Speech By Ms Ng Qian Qian On Behalf of 2023 Postgraduate Scholarship Recipients

Good evening to our guest of honour, Mr Alvin Tan, chairman of the Tan Kah Kee Foundation, Mr Chua Seng Chong, distinguished members of the Tan Kah Kee Foundation postgraduate scholarship committee, including Chairman Professor Eugene Tan (who is with us in spirit), my fellow scholars, and guests. Thank you all for being here tonight, and for giving me the opportunity and responsibility of speaking on behalf of the postgraduate scholarship recipients.

I will do my best to give an uplifting speech, but as a chronic overthinker, I don't think I'm particularly optimistic. I have however, been told that I'm really idealistic. I have been going around telling people that I don't think women students should be sexually harassed in schools. One lady said to me: Wah, you're so idealistic!

To be labelled as idealistic can mean two things. The first is praise: the idealistic person gets behind really good causes that will benefit the world. But it is also criticism: to be idealistic is to be unrealistic. These two sides of idealism, as condescending praise, go together in a saying: If you're not an idealist at twenty, you don't have a heart. If you continue being idealistic at forty, you don't have a brain.

To me, however, idealism and pragmatism are not contradictory, but complementary. You can, and I think we should, hold ourselves to higher standards, while working hard to find practical ways to achieve them. Then again, maybe I feel this way because I'm young.

But Tan Kah Kee stayed idealistic throughout his life. He co-founded his first school (Tao Nan) at the age of 33 (in 1907). He argued for democracy at the risk of persecution from Qing government in 1910. He campaigned against Japanese aggression at the risk of execution during World War 2, and founded and reconstructed schools even when his businesses declined, till the end of his life in 1961.

And so I think to be labelled as idealistic sometimes says more about the world than about you: something is wrong when women students have to go into their diplomas and degrees, expecting and accepting sexual harassment. No one's access to education should be blocked or compromised solely because of their identity. The world should change, so stand your ground and don't stop being idealistic. Don't stop working towards your ideals.

I don't think it's too much of a stretch to say it is partly thanks to Tan Kah Kee's idealism and pioneering efforts in making education accessible that I now stand before you today. He believed that education is key to uplifting the underserved, and that education should be accessible to anyone who wanted it, regardless of their gender. I'll highlight that the third school Tan Kah Kee set up in Singapore was Chong Hock Girls' School, in 1915. The fourth was Nanyang Girls' School, in 1918. Women's education was probably not a priority then, but Tan Kah Kee didn't let that stop him from recognising this then altering the situation. And of course he didn't let the war stop him when he converted Nan Chiau Teachers' Training College to Nan Chiau Girls' High School in 1947. These schools are still operating today.

But more than one hundred years since Tan Kah Kee's first efforts, much work remains to be done. Girls are allowed into schools, but are not necessarily treated as equals in the classroom. Students from low-income families may be seated in the classroom, but carry a much heavier knapsack on their way to school.

So on behalf of all scholarship recipients, I want to thank the Tan Kah Kee Foundation, members of the organizing and selection committee, our donors, and especially my donor, Mdm Doreen Liu, for extending Tan Kah Kee's ideals, for doing the hard work of improving genuine access to education, and for supporting our nascent ambitions by lifting us up, higher and closer to our aspirations.

And to my peers who are about to embark on new journeys with the mighty support of friends, family, and allies in the Tan Kah Kee Foundation, congratulations. I'll leave you with a quote that a dear friend shared with me, a friend who continues to remind me that girls deserve to go as far in their education as their intellect and curiosity craves: Idealism is only naïve when it lacks action, determination and imagination. Your idealism is courageous and inspiring. Don't let anyone convince you otherwise.

Thank you.