SJT: Thank you, Professor HU Lingyun.

I am absolutely delighted to be here in Beijing at Beihang University. UBC has a longstanding relationship with Beihang University and just last month President HUAI visited The University of British Columbia with a delegation of your faculty.

HOW I CAME TO BE HERE WITH YOU TODAY

While it is certainly great to be here, it was no easy task to get here. It involved taxis, airport security, long airplane flights, more taxis, and, happily, a bit of walking.

And this is just my individual route here. If we consider the various journeys that were involved in bringing all of us together at this one
time and place, it is rather a remarkable choice we have made, isn’t it? To gather physically together in this one particular place.

These days, there are many alternatives to physical meetings that can save time, effort, money and resources. Many of these methods are regularly used and actively encouraged as alternatives to physical meetings by my university and, I imagine, by your own.

But let me repeat that I am very glad to be here today...to be here, right here, in this place, and how glad I am that you are also here, in this shared physical place with me. That we are here together.

I have already derived a great deal of benefit from being here, having personal conversations with many of you, and achieving important milestones—benefits I might not have experienced if our meetings had been virtual. Without in any way discounting the newer communication tools at our disposal, I want to celebrate the fact that we as individuals, and we as our respective institutions, benefit from one another and will continue to do so in ways that are uniquely dependent upon the physical places our institutions hold on earth and
upon the complex human things that can only happen when we spend time with one another in these places.

I speak of how I arrived here today because it is relevant to my purpose in being here today. And that is to talk about place and to talk about change. In particular I want to talk about the way the world is changing, about changes that are occurring and need to occur in our universities in response, and more specifically about the crucial roles a university’s physical place and its sense of place play in this changing world.

THREE DIMENSIONS OF CHANGE

It’s fashionable these days to talk about how much our world is changing; but ours is not the only age to experience massive change. The middle part of the Han Dynasty saw the development of Silk Road trading routes, and the establishment of the Imperial Academy Taixue. These had a transformative effect on the civilizations of China, India, Persia, Europe and Arabia. Certainly the 1500s after Gutenberg and Columbus saw global change economically, socially and intellectually. The Industrial Revolution with the railroad and telegraph again
transformed the economy and brought about upheavals in the way people lived, worked, travelled and communicated.

Still, I believe that we have a right to claim that the changes of the present are even more earth-shaking than those that went before, if only because our age of change still includes and builds upon those previous ones, which continue to transform our world. Like a snowball rolling down a mountain slope we are experiencing an acceleration in the pace of change and a rapid increase in its magnitude.

I invite you to consider three areas in which rapid and deep-seated change is fundamentally shifting our world and how we think about place—our sense of place—within it:

The first is interconnectivity. Perhaps it has always been true that everything is connected, but now that fact is inescapable and the repercussions nearly instantaneous. Information travels at or near the speed of light, and no longer just from one person to another, as in the telegraph and telephone, or one to many, as in broadcast radio and television, but many to many, over networks of digital networks.
We are all ever more intricately entwined. Interconnectivity is changing how Hollywood and Bollywood make movies, how Hong Kong makes money, how academics conduct and publish their research, how elections are planned and even how insurrections are organized.

Thanks to this interconnectivity, hundreds of millions of people are walking around today with devices enabling access to the sum of all world knowledge, past and present, in their pockets. (The fact that they may be using this miraculous capability merely to share cute videos of kittens is a sad irony.)

The second area in which change in our world is accelerating directs our attention to the world as earth: Mother Earth. We may address this vast issue of change with one word: sustainability. This world, our Earth, is made of matter; and that has always mattered, but never more urgently than now. We cannot escape the realization that, as environmentalists have been saying for some time, “There is no ‘away.’” We no longer have the luxury of deluding ourselves that there is a place on earth or in the air where we can dump our exhaust, garbage and chemicals where it won’t matter.
When I speak of sustainability I refer to the complex social, economic and scientific issues involved in meeting our present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to do the same. I also refer to the impact of accelerating climate change, which is the result of our inability so far to address these issues.

The third area of change in our world that I want to mention is the sheer mobility of people around it. I’m speaking of a growing population of creative, highly trained, well-educated and ambitious global citizens who are well informed, internationally engaged and highly mobile. As with information interconnectivity, this mobility is not so much one-to-many or many-to-one anymore, but many-to-many.

For instance, the number of people receiving advanced education in China tripled in the first decade of this century and is likely to double again in the next 10 to 15 years. Minds that a few decades ago might not have had an opportunity to advance at all, are now getting a chance at education. More than ever that chance begins at home, and more than ever the opportunity presents itself to continue the voyage of their lives anywhere in the world. Competition is heating up.
Countries, regions, industries and institutions are competing for talent. Even the problems facing our world are in competition for this highly mobile resource of minds, the minds needed to address these problems.

**Interconnectivity, sustainability, and mobility:** the excitation (the literal and figurative heating up) of ideas, of earth and of people: these three are all at play today, interacting with a host of other issues and changes affecting our world, from intractable disease to economic fragility to pandemic poverty to political instability—a veritable mob of issues and problems demanding our attention.

How are we as academic institutions, both independently and together, responding to these vectors of change? What is our ability to respond? Moreover, what is our responsibility with regard to ideas, to the earth and to people? It is essential in some ways that we hold firm, that we not abandon our deepest principles. However, it is also essential, of course, that we do change, to adapt to a changing world. What is it that guides us between the two horns of this dilemma? As we change, and as we stay the same, it is our continual responsibility to effect change in the world: change for the better.
Universities have always maintained a sensitive balance between being a part of the world and being somewhat apart from it. As we work hard (and we must) to help guide our changing world and adjust ourselves to its changes, I believe it is vital that we change this balance of part of and apart from without losing its dynamic tension.

**DEMONSTRATING THE POSSIBLE IN PLACE**

Universities are places of change. They always have been. We have been the inspiration, location and provocation of social, economic, technological and cultural evolution for a thousand years or more. And yet only recently have universities, as places of change, begun to make full use of their physical presence on earth—their sociology, geography and ecology—within their mandate to serve society locally and globally.

My own university, The University of British Columbia, is of a geographic size and population comparable to a mid-sized town. The land we occupy is inseparable from the rest of the world, yet we also happen to be the sole owner-occupiers of all our own utilities and the
stewards of a rather large and complex urban community separate from the city of Vancouver and the rest of Canada.

Being just somewhat apart from the rest of the world we have the liberty, and I would now suggest the responsibility, to use our basic operations, administration and infrastructure—our physical place—to test, model and demonstrate new approaches to sustainability that are consistent with our research agenda.

We have been calling this responsibility the University as a Living Laboratory. We are able to use our position as just somewhat apart from the political and economic realities of the rest of the world to “demonstrate the possible” in a way that enables change to “scale upward” from initial research and prototyping to actual, large-scale, practical applications in the wider world.

Here is one example. This spring my university adopted a new energy storage system, a prototype smart grid, created in partnership with Alpha Technologies Ltd. and Corvus Energy. It serves as a backup power grid for our Bioenergy Research and Demonstration Facility on
campus, and it fulfills a necessary requirement for allowing large communities to integrate clean-energy sources into their power grids.

It is necessary for universities to study complex scientific, sociological and political issues. It is also our responsibility to address these issues with new ideas, new knowledge and new solutions. But our responsibility does not end there. We must also invest our unique place on earth and distinct, self-contained community to convert ideas about sustainability into practical, transformational change that can be adopted widely to benefit the planet.

THE ENDURING IMPORTANCE OF PLACE

As I call for us to make more use of our universities as places, I don’t want to suggest that place has never before been an important part of universities. Universities as communities, as physical gathering places, have for centuries been powerful catalysts of thought and of change. I am a law professor, not a chemist; but my general understanding of catalysts matches very closely with my own experience of universities. A catalyst, as I understand it, acts very much like a gathering place for different molecules, holding them together, facilitating their interaction
with and ultimately reaction to each other. By creating a space for collisions, a catalyst speeds up the rate of a reaction.

Universities as catalysts attract and combine people of vastly different aptitudes and interests, placing them in environments where they can react to one another—law professors and chemists, particle physicists and performance artists, climate scientists and classical scholars. The collisions that take place, both intentional and fortuitous, create the conditions for unpredictable discovery. Universities are among the only institutions on earth that are able to cultivate serendipity and innovation in this way and to this extent.

As valuable as the technologies are that allow us to communicate and collaborate over great distance, we must never let them blind us to the necessity and benefit of coming physically together as a diverse community. People come to universities to be transformed, to be inspired, to learn how to think, to learn how to learn, and to learn how to work with one another. For this, people need other people, and they need a place to gather with those people.
Consider the case of Yahoo!, one of the most virtual of companies working completely in cyberspace. Marissa Mayer, the CEO, has famously required all staff to physically come back into the office. She concedes that many people may be more productive when they're alone, but she notes that they are more collaborative and innovative when they’re together. She says, “Some of the best ideas come from pulling two different ideas together."

I prefer the idea of our universities attracting, rather than commanding people to gather together for the pulling together of ideas. But to be effective gathering places, universities need to be magnets for talented and diverse people. They need to be alive and lively, inside and out, day and night. They need to be communities unto themselves, but also part of larger communities offering opportunities for engagement, debate, investigation and, yes, intimacy, as a part of life, not just as an education apart from life or in preparation for it.

THE ‘BRAND’: A UNIVERSITY’S DISTINCT SENSE OF PLACE

French philosopher Marc Augé speaks of lieux and non-lieux, places and non-places. Non-lieux are spaces or places that are essentially
interchangeable, and they tend to render humans anonymous. As examples of non-lieux, Augé identifies airports, motorways and supermarkets. According to Augé, non-lieux is what luxury hotel chains have in common with refugee camps.

In an age of massive interconnectivity and free-flowing mobility, in the face of powerful forces of change, we have at hand potent tools whose use can easily tend to homogenize us, to turn all universities into one giant university, to blur distinctive places into non-lieux: virtual nowheres. This, I believe, is a great danger. Non-lieux may be the product of change, but they do not and cannot create change.

When I come here, and when I visit other universities, I am always excited to taste the distinctiveness of that particular community. What does it feel like? Does it have a personality? Specific points of view? This, to me, is its sense of place, and I experience it viscerally as well as intellectually. Here in Chongqing I find a unique place that rewards my efforts to travel here. Universities should always be worth travelling to.

We all need to assert our distinctiveness of place and with it our uniqueness of culture, perspective and expertise. Our differences, in
fact, enable us to be a part of a robust collaborative effort to change the world for the better. We will be more effective if we are tackling issues and challenges from a variety of different angles and perspectives.

A SENSE OF PLACE IN CYBERSPACE

I’ll suggest that our distinctiveness, our ‘brands” should be experienced in our virtual presence as well as on our campuses. We need to differentiate online just as vividly as we do on campus. We each need a distinct sense of place in cyberspace.

We are challenged to ensure that how others experience us online is neither as a grab-bag of disparate stuff nor a homogenized generic product. Our virtual presence, just like our physical one, needs distinguishing characteristics, distinctive points of view and personality, and that requires some intentional curation and self-reflection.

Our virtual presence should also serve to connect people to our unique physical place. Among the millions of people who have taken online university courses, the vast majority express a clear preference for a
blended approach of virtual access and face-to-face meeting. And so rather than replacing a classroom with a screen, our use of digital technology should seek to create virtual windows, telescopes, portals and listening posts linking people not only to other people, but also to increasingly vital physical places.

THE INTERCONNECTIVITY OF PEOPLE AND IDEAS

If higher education is powerfully dependent upon people gathering in distinctive places, consider how powerful it is when people begin to travel amongst those places, encountering new worlds of people.

In the history of higher education, there has never been more ease of movement. That movement is not only within the academy, it is also among the academy, government, industry and civil society. It is across borders and across sectors. So too are the issues that face us. They cross borders and cross sectors as well. What we experience locally is almost always simultaneously global.

There is no easy way to become globally aware. And so it behooves each of us as universities and as societies to educate our students to be
global citizens. Each of our communities should send as many students as possible abroad to study, and each of our institutions should invite as many from abroad to study with us. I am speaking here of physical travel, such as what has brought me here today (not just collaboration through telecommunications, though that is also an essential element.)

One example that I admire is the Beijing-Tianjin Water Resources Management Project, which involves a partnership among three Chinese and four Canadian Universities working towards a better quality of life through improved management of water resources.

Collaborative mobility such as this has benefits for the environment, for institutions, and for individuals. It enables our students to acquire local knowledge and language, but also to experience the transformational quality of spending time in distinct and interesting places with exciting and inspiring people who are different from us. This broadens each individual. But there is more.

As we move from place to place our students, researchers and even we administrators have the opportunity to cultivate a generation of globally networked friends and colleagues who know each other, who
like to work together and who are comfortable on each other’s turf. We are already seeing new businesses, new partnerships, new industries and initiatives arising from such lasting, international friendships. We will see, and need to see, many more world-embracing connections in the next few years.

It feels appropriate to mention one example that is timely. Professor Qiqi GAO, Director of the Political Science Institute of the East China University of Political Science and Law in Shanghai has for the past six months been working and teaching at the University of British Columbia as a Visiting Associate Professor at our Institute of Asian Research. His work is directed toward China’s participation in global governance and in Vancouver he has been working with Professor Yves Tiberghien, researching a project entitled “The Implications of Canada’s Deliberative Democracy Model on China’s Democratic Development”.

For his part Professor GAO has invited me to his university, and it is through his kind invitations that I will shortly travel to Shanghai to visit, for the first time, the East China University of Political Science and Law, and meet with President Qinhua He to explore new opportunities for collaboration between our institutions.
INTERCONNECTIVITY OF INSTITUTIONS

Just as global encounters provide opportunities for individuals, we have tremendous opportunities as institutions to join forces as networks of universities to share research, provide intercultural and international degree programs and, essentially, to open our institutions to the world. From our different places, using our different tools, competing for the world’s best talent, we need to communicate more, and we need to collaborate more.

The Joint Centre for Translational Medical Research in Child Development and Alzheimer’s Disease is just such an example of collaboration. It involves not only the sharing of research and expertise but also the physical exchange of faculty members and students between our institutions and, of course, the hands-on treatment of children in your hospital.

What I am suggesting is that our universities need to continue to change in many ways in order to remain relevant, viable, and meaningful places of change. They need to include their physical
infrastructure in fulfilling their mandate to serve society. They need to increase their distinctive sense of place both physically and virtually. They need to encourage and facilitate greater exchange of students and faculty between places for greater collaboration. And they need to do all of these things in order to address the world’s toughest problems.

PUTTING CHANGE IN ITS PLACE – PRESERVING OUR PRINCIPLES

But I am not suggesting indiscriminate change—change for change’s sake. Even as we work very hard to effect change and to adapt to changing circumstances, we must also put change in its place. In a folksy English colloquialism, we must not throw the baby out with the bathwater.

No matter how thoroughly we change, we must ensure that our universities protect and preserve the qualities that have made us so valuable to human progress over the centuries. First among these is the principle of freedom of inquiry. Universities must remain places where people can ask the very toughest questions of society, from within society. This is that aspect of apart from and a part of that no
other institution can replace. If we don’t fulfill this function, then no one else can.

We must not give up our responsibility to protect and preserve knowledge, to communicate, test, prove, debate and analyze.

And as we continue to communicate faster and more freely across borders, we must also honour and preserve the university’s role of facilitating “the long now”: long and slow open-ended conversations across time, between the past and the present, and from the present into the future.

From their inception, universities have had an obligation to serve society, to create and preserve knowledge, and to teach. As the world changes, we are challenged on the one hand to preserve and protect those qualities that make us unique among institutions. On the other hand we must change thoroughly wherever the status quo interferes with our ability to serve fully. When I say change, I do not simply mean that we must adapt. I mean that we must act.

We are obligated by our age-old responsibilities to lead.
Some 22 centuries ago, Archimedes of Syracuse is reported to have said (in Greek) “Give me a place to stand, and I will move the earth.” He was speaking about leverage. My friends, it is time to apply leverage. We need to move the earth. This is our role; it has always been our role; it is the reason we exist. And I firmly believe that we can succeed at moving the earth into a sustainable future.

Our interconnectedness, our commitment to sustainability, our global mobility. These are our levers.

We have the tools for collaboration and communication. We need now to lower further the barriers to cooperation. We are blessed with the tools of mobility. We need now to move further out of our comfort zones. We bear the responsibility of a planet in peril. We need now to direct the urgency we feel into the tools of action.

Our obligation to society today demands a greater commitment to the world as a place, a place worth caring for, a place worth perfecting and preserving. Let us make full use of all of our tools, including and especially our own individual places on this earth, our university
campuses, our university communities. Let us look inward to what sets us apart from other places and let us direct our unique resources outward as a part of the wider world, to effect meaningful change, to move the earth.

Thank you.

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