

## **Opening Rixin College, Humanities**

**Tsinghua University, 9 sept 2020**

Let me start by offering you, from The Netherlands, at the very opposite end of the Silk Road, my congratulations on this unique educational initiative, and especially to Professor Wang Zhongchen present here, as one of its founding fathers, and to Vice-President Peng Gang who has supported your initiatives, as well as my own Tsinghua logic center, in many ways. It is an honor to be part of your official launch. I wish all the thinkers and do-ers who made the Rixin College possible all imaginable (and even all not yet imaginable) success.

It is great to see the Chinese Ministry of Education and Tsinghua University working together toward a national goal of Strengthening Foundations in academic research. To me, strengthening foundations means fostering an elusive but precious talent of fundamental thinking. This fundamental thinking is a way of life: cultivating an open mind, and learning to ask your own questions rather than just giving answers to exam questions that are owned by others. This may sound difficult, but you students have one thing in your favor: the natural gift of curiosity that all human beings on this planet are born with.

Fundamental thinking is a value of its own, but it has also shaped our history. The ancient Babylonian astronomers had a wonderful data-driven system for computing the movements of the planets, finely tuned in thousands of years. But it took the Greek philosophers to ask the Why question behind the How of these calculations. What is the true system of the planets, and where is the place of our Planet Earth? And the different answers to those questions gave us physics, astronomy, and cosmology. But I can also give modern examples. Logicians have long asked foundational questions about valid reasoning by human and machines, and wondered what it can, and equally importantly, what it cannot, achieve. The results of those concerns have transformed our world and will keep doing so: they are called computer science and AI. But it's not just about computers and science. Modern philosophy, too, stays part of the mix, by asking its perennial questions of what is knowledge, or what is the good, in ever new ways.

I can see this process going on all around me at the other places outside Beijing where I work, Amsterdam and Stanford. And let me tell you it is not a one-way process: first think fundamentally, then apply, then stay there. Fundamental thinking and practical thinking influence each other, and much of our intellectual history is a never-ending dance of back-and-forth influences between the two.

My examples may have sounded technical, on the science side. But fundamental thinking is wider. You are students in the School of Humanities, led by Professor Wan Junren, who is also with us today. This will give you a unique opportunity to contribute in a wide open field, from philosophy to linguistics, logic or ethics. Tsinghua's fast-expanding School of Humanities has a prestigious history, but its current rejuvenation phase offers you ample scope for learning, creating new things, and taking unconventional initiatives.

Let me add one more thing. You are not just students, you are Chinese students from the famous Chinese educational system, whose national exams have been a cultural World Wonder for many centuries: just as famous as, maybe even more important than, the Chinese Wall. And still more than that, you are Tsinghua students: a unique community of talents. Just open your minds to the people around you, and you cannot fail to be intrigued, informed, and inspired.

A video like this is only one-way communication. I hope to make it two-way soon, when I can visit Tsinghua in person again, meeting you in classrooms and on our beautiful campus. It will be great in the coming years to watch where you Rixin students will go. And especially: to listen to which new fundamental questions you will ask.

Johan van Benthem