

FEATURE

He Jiang: Making history at Harvard

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He Jiang, the first Chinese graduate to ever speak at Harvard's commencement ceremony, has become a star on Chinese social media

“Awesome! Technology and science will change the world. As a graduate from Harvard, he wins honors for our country!” wrote Weibo user Danuannanpananer.

On Thursday morning, Harvard commencement addresses, with their centuries-old history, welcomed their first-ever Chinese orator. He Jiang, a 2016 PhD graduate in biochemistry, delivered a speech representing the graduate students at the commencement.

He Jiang began his address with a childhood memory from his small village in central China's Hunan province. He was bitten on the hand by a poisonous spider and his mother treated it with an old folk cure setting his hand on fire rather than going to a doctor, because there were no doctors.

Studying at Harvard, made him see how scientific discovery could help others in simple ways and got him thinking of the uneven distribution of science and technology in the modern world and wondering what scientists could do to change the situation.

“My experience reminds me how important it is for researchers to communicate our knowledge to those who need it. Because using the science we already have, we could probably bring my village and thousands like it into the world you and I take for granted every day. And that's an impact every one of us can make,” He said in his speech.



“The true value of research is to communicate the outcomes of the research to the world indiscriminately for the benefits of the human race all over the world,” wrote Facebook user Louis Kwong.

He Jiang was among the three graduating representatives to speak at the commencement. By tradition, one of the orations is delivered in Latin by a graduating senior from the college; the second, in English, is also by a graduating college senior; and the third by a student representative of the graduate and professional schools.

Other guest speakers sharing the podium this year included Academy Award-winning director Steven Spielberg.

To win the opportunity to speak, He went through three rounds of fierce competition, including drafts and auditions. The three orators were chosen by a panel of judges to deliver an address “from memory” to an assemblage of approximately 32,000, including members of the governing board, honorary degree recipients, faculty, parents, alumni and graduates.

Asked why he entered the competition, He simply said, "I wanted more voices from China to be heard."

But ability and hard work are what really led He to the podium.

He grew up in a small village with poor educational opportunities. His father, who didn't finish high school and was locked out of many work opportunities in big cities because of it, impressed upon He and his younger brother from their boyhood the importance of studying hard, using his own experience as an example.

"My father was always strict with us so we'd avoid repeating his experience," He said.

Unlike his father, He's mother was more like a friend, who always encouraged him through the challenges of learning and life. "One of the biggest problems for rural students is that the available educational resources are limited and students lack motivation," He said. "So thanks go to my dad for pushing me to study in that environment and to my mom, whose encouragement helped keep me focused on my studies."

He graduated from the University of Science and Technology of China "one of China's top universities" with a bachelor's degree in 2009 and was accepted into Harvard's PhD program on full scholarship the same year. All he knew about America was from books and films and he was in for some culture shock.

"Studying at Harvard, everybody around me was outstanding and my English was not as fluent as it is now. I lost confidence. I even began to wonder how I ever got accepted to Harvard," he said.

But with time he found his footing.

"The thing I like about American campus culture is that it's diversified and encourages diversity," he said. "As long as you are willing to discover, you can find a variety of resources you

are interested in, to communicate with professionals and to make friends."

He took a job as resident tutor for undergraduates and through that he learned about the commencement orations competition.

Apart from working and studying, He took part in activities both on and off campus, including start-up and innovation sharing sessions, activities held by Chinese student associations and reading clubs.

"I've always had a great interest in literature," He said.

One of his favorite authors is Peter Hessler. "His books *River Town*, *Oracle Bones* and *Country Driving* are all my favorites," he said.

Encouraged by a history professor, He took up a pen and started writing about rural China in English.

"China has been undergoing such rapid development in recent years and China's villages have developed rapidly as well. Foreigners have more knowledge of China's mega cities, but with a limited number of channels, their impressions of China's rural life may still be lacking," said He, who has deep feelings for his hometown and still goes back to visit.

"I hope more of China's voices will be heard in the West, since what we have done so far is far from enough," He said

Taking advantage of weekends and spare time, He finished up his book and just signed with one of Europe's biggest publishers.

He has already begun work as a postdoctoral fellow at MIT's Koch Institute for Integrative Cancer Research, where he will study malaria and hepatitis virus infection, and ultrasensitive early cancer diagnostics.

It hasn't been an easy road, but that's okay. "Perhaps it's because I suffered a lot

growing up, so many frustrations to me are things
I can definitely bear,” He said.