

## FEATURE

# The Fujia Yang that I know

By Da Hsuan Feng

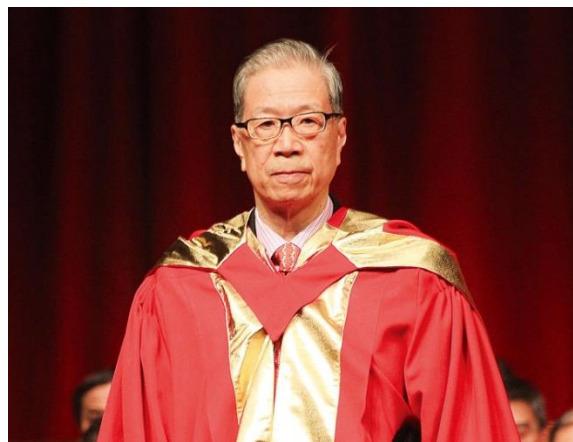
I am deeply honored to be asked to say a few words about Fujia at the occasion celebrating his 80th birthday.

My friends, this is not an easy task. First of all, Fujia's lifetime accomplishments, such as his leadership in science, education (Fudan University President, as the first Chinese to assume the Chancellorship of Nottingham University and the Founding President of Nottingham University Ningbo, China, and last but not least, developing China's synchrotron research, the theme of the Conference today, to new and spectacular heights) are globally known. For sure, for this audience, who are his students, collaborators, colleagues, your knowledge about him is certainly as deep and as broad, if not broader or deeper, than mine. Last but not least, ten years ago, I gave a talk at his 70th birthday conference. When the invitation came to me a few weeks ago, I asked myself the following question: "what can I possibly say now that I did not say then?"

I then reread what I said ten years ago. I found out that in that speech, I discussed more about China than Fujia. So, I am really happy that at this occasion, I can say something about Fujia

However, something worries even more now. If I am so honored and lucky to be asked again to speak at Fujia's 90th birthday, or 100th, WHAT CAN I SAY THEN?

China opened up to the world in 1977. Almost immediately afterwards, Fujia became my intellectual mentor in the broadest sense of the word. If my memory serves me right, somehow through Academician Zuqia Wang of Peking Normal University I was connected to Fujia almost immediately after China opened up.



*Professor Fujia Yang*

In the past 40 years, I have had many personal interactions with him. In hindsight, those interactions certainly shaped my career as a scientist and later as a university administrator. For that, I am deeply grateful. So today, please allow me to tell you two such interactions and the lessons, and I hope some wisdom, I derived from them.

### Lesson 1: Learn to Ask Questions

For the second half of his career, Fujia became deeply engaged in education reform, especially higher education reform. This is a well-known fact and there is no need for me to belabor it here.

As I mentioned, Fujia has a sharp and focused mind. One of his great strengths is that he wastes no words and goes right to the point. He said often in his speeches that students needs to Xue Wen, the Chinese phrase for "knowledge" which literally means "LEARN TO ASK."

Another characteristic of Fujia is that somehow he is a personification of the amalgamation of East and West. He is perceived by the world to be a "Global Citizen." Yet at the same time, his not to be confused Chinese

heritage oozes out of him! He does ask questions, but usually pointedly but politely. With that, he always can get the best answer.

The best example of the above characteristic of Fujia was in 1993, when the then Israeli Prime Minister, the late Itzhak Rabin visited Fudan University. There was a famous dialogue between Rabin and Fujia.

Fujia: “Your Excellency, it is well known that your country does not possess a drop of fossil fuel underneath the earth and desert on the surface. How does your country become the bread basket and high technology center of the Middle East?”

Without the slightest hesitation, Rabin answered: “Because we have seven world-class universities.”

This dialogue tells me two things about Fujia. First, whenever he meets someone new, he does his homework about that person a priori. Clearly, in order to receive Rabin, Fujia did enough homework about Israel. Second, Fujia is very comfortable with foreigners, and therefore foreigners are very comfortable with him. He is even comfortable with foreign dignitaries, such as Rabin. Only with enough comfort level was he able to ask what may appear to be an “impolite” question, without being impolite.

In hindsight, by asking a very good and penetrating question, Fujia actually extracted a great answer from Rabin whose implication was just as important to China as it was to Israel!

My friends, one cannot help but be impressed by Rabin’s quick answer. However, wouldn’t you not agree with me that if it was not because Fujia asking the right question, and thus set the stage, would we get such a succinct answer about the fundamental importance of higher education? It is often we hear people saying so and so gave a “great answer! What we hear less often, in fact almost never, is “what a great question!” From the Rabin-Yang dialogue, when Yang set the stage by asking such a question, the

answer of Rabin, great as it was, was really the only one he could give!

## Lesson 2: Public Policies

In 1979, as a naive and young Assistant Professor of Physics, I went to the Niels Bohr Institute in the University of Copenhagen. There I met Fujia and his wife, Teacher Peng in person for the first time. Of course, as many of you know, to be able to have one’s spouse joining the trip at that point of time in China was something truly unusual. That alone tells me that Fujia was, and still is, a man of unusual character.

As all of you know, from 1966 to 1976, China suffered through 10 horrific years of Cultural Revolution. In 1978, there was a globally well publicized conference held in Beijing whose theme was “National Reconstruction through Science.”

As a young physicist, the Beijing conference of 1978 greatly attracted my intellectual curiosity.

I should preface this by letting you know that prior to 1972, the year I received my Ph.D. in theoretical physics from the University of Minnesota, China and for sure Chinese Science was essentially a blur, if not a black-hole for me. From 1972 to 1974, I was a postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Theoretical Physics of the University of Manchester. It was there that I first saw in its departmental library a subscription to the *Acta Physica Sinica* Only then I began to realize that physics was not dormant in China! Therefore, when China opened up in 1977, I literally experienced a breath of mental fresh air, and I became even more eager to deepen my understanding of China and Chinese science.

For the above reason, you could imagine my excitement I had when my host at the Bohr Institute informed me prior to my arrival that there will be a group of scientists sent from China to the Bohr Institute.

The person who was handling the Chinese visitors’ logistics obviously did not

know the members of the group. He wanted me to be of assistance in case these visitors have language difficulties. As it turns out, all the visitors were fluent in English. In fact, one of them, Academician and now the late Xian Dingchang was fluent in Russian as well! I became lifelong friends with all and Fujia and Teacher Peng are two such individuals.

The Bohr Institute, the Mecca of physics was, and I am sure still is, a place where scientists from all corners of the world would converge to and was the platform to discuss openly scientific issues without any sense of “professional authority.” I recall one important short conversation over lunch at the Bohr Institute I had with Fujia, which I am not sure whether he remembers today. That conversation literally shaped my thinking about higher education many decades later.

As I mentioned earlier, I was very interested in the 1978 Beijing Conference. So I remember my conversation with Fujia was as follows:

“Professor Yang, it is so exciting to hear about the Chinese Science Conference in Beijing last year that science will play a role in China’s reconstruction (I remember I specifically left out the phrase The Great Cultural Revolution because I was not sure whether it was Kosher to mention that term then to someone who just came from China!)”

His answer startled me. In what I learned later on was his style of conversation, direct and to the point. He said: “Science cannot rebuild China. Proper public policies can rebuild China,” he concluded.

My friends, you can imagine that I was quite taken aback by such a terse answer. It was not at all what I expected. Frankly, I was expecting Fujia to agree with me about a Chinese

*He (Fujia Yang) was telling me that for China to make progress, the nation must institute “public policies” which fit the “social and political habits” of the nation*

national excitement of a “Spring of Chinese Science.” Mind you, at that moment, the term “public policies,” was not in my Chinese or English vocabulary. I had no follow-up to that answer and therefore the discussion was dropped.

Fast forward to 1997. At that time, I was involved working with a United States Congressman named Curt Weldon on various technical projects. Weldon was then the Congressman from my home district in the suburb of Philadelphia. As we became more familiar with one another, Weldon and I had many conversations on a variety of subjects. I remember Weldon said to me one day something to the following effect:

“You know, Da Hsuan, politics is public policies personification! When the United States Congress makes “laws,” of “rulings,” we de facto are instituting public policies for social good and the society must obey. Hopefully, such public policies are the results of ethical, humane and culminating social and political habits.”

When Weldon said that, I recall at that moment, I suddenly remembered that two decades ago, the term “public policies” was uttered by Fujia. It suddenly dawned on me what Fujia meant. He was telling me that for China to make progress, the nation must institute “public policies”• which fit the “social and political habits” of the nation. As Weldon said, public policies must be a result of a deep understanding of the social and political habits and must be beneficial to the nation at large.

So it dawned on me, right then and there, 20 years after what Fujia said to me in Copenhagen, that “for national reconstruction, public policies are the reasons and science is simply the tool!” To put science before public policies is de facto putting the cart before the horse!

My friends, nearly all global challenges humanity are facing today, human hatred, energy challenge, population explosion, and so on and so forth, are the results of poor public policies for the past century, or centuries. It also dawned on me that today higher education globally, and for sure in Asia Pacific, maybe missing the boat by not creating a “public policy ambiance” for our faculty and students.

This was indeed a fundamental and profound lesson I learned slowly from Fujia! It literally altered my thinking about higher education in the past three decades.

## Epilogue

The two “simple” examples I mentioned in this discussion are the tip of an iceberg of Fujia’s powerful character. In a greater context, Fujia is not an isolated case but a member of a large and powerful group of Chinese intellectuals.

Friends, in another context I wrote the following:

“1976 was a defining year for modern China. Chairman Mao died on Sept. 9 that year, followed immediately by the spectacular collapse of the so-called “Gang of Four”, thus bringing closure to ten painful years of “Cultural Revolutions”, and ushered China into a new era. Someday, historians will undoubtedly consider the new era as the “miracle of the world in the 20th century”.

In 1976, after a decade of utter devastation, China was at the verge of a complete “meltdown”, economically, technologically and intellectually. Having quarter humanity, and a land size spanning nearly half of Asia, such a meltdown would have horrifying global implications!

Yet, no meltdown occurred.

A fundamental reason why there was no meltdown was because of the Herculean contributions of the tens of millions of Chinese intellectuals. In their darkest hours during that

# Yang Fujia

Excerpted from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Professor **Yang Fujia** (b. June 1936) is an academician of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, a renowned nuclear physicist and former Chancellor of the University of Nottingham, England. Yang’s ancestral hometown is Zhenhai County, Ningbo<sup>□</sup>, Zhejiang Province<sup>□</sup>. He was born in Shanghai, graduated from Shanghai Ge-Zhi High School and obtained a degree in physics from Fudan University. He was a lecturer and professor of physics at Fudan, serving as President of the university from 1994 to 1999.

Yang was Director of the Shanghai Institute of Nuclear Research of the Chinese Academy of Sciences from 1987 to 2001, was Chairman of the Shanghai Science and Technology Association (1992-1996), and he was the first president of the Association of University Presidents of China (1997-1999).

Yang has held visiting professorships at the Niels Bohr Institute in Copenhagen, Denmark; Rutgers University, New Jersey, U.S.; the State University of New York at Stony Brook, USA; and the University of Tokyo, Japan. He holds honorary degrees from Soka University, Tokyo, Japan; the State University of New York, USA; the University of Hong Kong; the University of Nottingham, England; and the University of Connecticut, USA. Professor Yang Fujia was formally installed as The University of Nottingham’s sixth Chancellor on 4 July 2001, the first time that a Chinese academic has become Chancellor of a UK university. He stepped down as Chancellor on 1 January 2013, being replaced by Sir Andrew Witty.

Other roles which Professor Yang has held include:

- Council Member representing China on the Association of East Asia Research Universities
- Member of the International Association of University Presidents
- Member of the Association of University Presidents of the Pacific Rim
- Vice-president of the Chinese Association of Science and Technology

Currently, he is the Chancellor of University of Nottingham, Ningbo campus.

era, enduring the hardest of hardships and suffering the deepest personal humiliations, they always maintained palpable hope for themselves, their family, their professions and their nation. Indeed, even without personal liberty, both physically and mentally, they remained important pillars of the nation, holding up its dignity. The successes of China of the 21st century are in no small part due to this group of individuals.”

There is no question in my mind that Fujia Yang is one of the pillars I mentioned in this writing.

Congratulations, Fujia. I hope I will give another talk about you at your 90th birthday celebration and your Centennial as well!

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*Prof. Victor Da Hsuan Feng is the Director of the Global Affairs and Special Advisor to the Rector, University of Macau.*