

Commencement Address The Art Institute of Houston

Nancy J. Li
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President Horn, members of the Board of Trustees, graduates, families and friends:

Let me begin by saying how deeply honored I am to have the privilege of being with you today to share your joy at such an important moment as your commencement from one of the best art colleges in the nation. As you begin the new lives and careers that you have prepared for, I would like to share a very direct and personal message with you.

That message is my belief that your own vision, determination and hard work matter more than any adversity you will ever face. Your dreams and aspirations make available to you a world of great possibilities if you will also commit to the work and responsibility that they contain.

The strength of the human spirit can be expressed in the way that you accept responsibility for your own decisions and actions. Your presence here today is an emblem of unique personal opportunities and blessings for each of you that have not always been available. Please accept my invitation to be mindful of these advantages and to embrace the opportunity before you wholeheartedly.

Today marks an important accomplishment for each of you and also a commencement or beginning of a new part of your lives. Today is also very special to me, as this is the first time in my life that I've put on a graduation cap and gown. Twenty-two years ago when I graduated from college in China, we did not yet have such an opportunity.

As President Horn said in his introduction, I was born, grew up and had my education in China. After the new China was established in 1949, Mao Zedong, the former president, believed that the key to improving China's economy was in steelmaking. So in 1958 he called the whole nation into a movement called the "Great Leap Forward." The result was that the whole nation soon entered into a disaster of hunger in which 38 million died in the following three years. The government started to adjust, trying hard to recover the economy from 1963, the year when I was born in the middle of November.

The Chinese will never forget the year of 1966 when China started another big political movement, the most cruel and miserable calamity in China's thousands of years of history called the "Cultural Revolution". The movement turned over all Chinese traditions, suppressed and executed millions of intellectuals and political leaders.

My mom was working in a paper manufacturing plant where all kinds of books from all over the country were transferred to be destroyed and turned into paper pulp. She secretly took a

lot of pieces of the books and brought them home for me to read. I am so grateful that she provided me such a privilege and vision.

During the ten years of the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, there were no colleges open in China. The students who graduated from middle or high schools were driven to remote rural areas and told by Mao's government to "learn from peasants and support the countryside." My mom started to worry about this when I started middle school. At the time, no foreign languages were taught in schools, so the idea of letting me learn English came to her when she was introduced to an English teacher who was exiled to our city.

So from then on, each day after dinner, no matter how cold, how hot, raining or snowing, I had to go to the teacher's apartment by walking 40 minutes each way in the darkness. My home city is located in the very north of China, where the winter starts from October until the end of the next April with average temperatures of 30-40 centi-degrees below zero, and the sun sets as early as 4:30 in the afternoon. The teacher and his wife were often not home, so each week I might have 2 or 3 short classes from him for 15 minutes each time. But I had to go each day on the chance that the teacher would be able to see me. The hardship and frustration of this arrangement made me ask to quit many times, but my mom's cold face and words were always there: "You decided, just do it!"

My parents were so delighted that I was always a very high academic achiever in school, especially after the schools recovered their academic curricula and colleges resumed operation in 1977. I skipped my first year of high school and smoothly passed the college entrance exams in the top 4% of the nation with a fully-funded scholarship. The whole income for our family with 4 kids was only \$120.00 a year, which did not change from when I was 3 until I went to college. So to save money, I ate no breakfast, bought the cheapest dishes for lunches and dinners, spent no money on clothes, and borrowed other classmates' reference books.

After college graduation at the top of my class, I was assigned to work as an associate professor at the age of 21. My career was on track and seemed promising; however the opportunity to study in Dalian University of Technology -- China's top university for a master certification program of Linguistics -- changed my vision. In April of 1993 I moved to a beautiful port city and was luckily hired on the day of my arrival by the largest joint-venture company in the city.

My training began by working 8 hours each day as an entry operator before a four-hour training class. After two weeks I secretly sneaked away and called my mom. I cried, telling her how I missed my husband and 3 year-old son in my hometown, and telling her how hard and tough the work was... My mom listened, but before I had finished, she interrupted, "You decided, just do it!" and hung up! I was so upset that I cried for a very long time. I thought my mom was just cold-blooded and didn't care at all about me.

However, I still chose to continue working hard until I fully finished the training. The Canadian boss was very happy that I had been through all the training and tests. He asked me to be his executive representative on the joint venture while he was abroad. For the first time I enjoyed the best conditions in the city with a high salary and the best benefits.

From 1994 to 1996 I was invited by a Houston based petro-chemical company, Westlake Group, to be their project manager in China. I began to think about moving to the U.S., an opportunity which I dared not imagine before. However it was a really hard decision, as I had to leave my husband and my son again who just moved with me for only a year. I still remember the day, February 14, 1996, right before leaving China when I called and woke my mother early in the morning. I was upset and told her I was not sure whether my decision was right. Once again I heard over the phone, "You decided, just go and do it!"

Before I left China, my husband bought me a solid gold necklace, which the Chinese think of as the best gift and something that will keep its value. He told me that if I could not stand and had no money left, I could sell the necklace to buy a return ticket. Fortunately, I found a job after working in a restaurant for just a month. The company promised to help applying for permanent residency but with the condition of a very low salary, to which I agreed. The boss soon laid off the other two staff members, so I worked three jobs for the same low salary. Those days were full of frustration, exhaustion and loneliness, but what kept me going on were the "cold" words: "You decided, just do it!"

At end of 1997 I achieved one of my dreams by establishing my own company. I was able to dedicate myself to education again and also extend more opportunities and visions to the people of the US and China, especially the young people.

We live in a rapidly changing world. In China one hundred years ago women did not even have the right to have their own names, now I am standing before you as someone who has lived and worked successfully in both cultures. You are so blessed to be born in this great nation, so blessed to have parents who have supported you selflessly, so blessed to have education from this finest institution of higher learning. With your talents, creativities and determinations, you will surely not only reward our community, but also reach the global audience and economy.

Today I still have that gold necklace on my neck. I did not sell it to buy a return ticket from my dreams and I never will. I remembered the words "You decided, just do it" and with my mother's message found the strength to persevere. It will be my special gift to my daughter to let her know that no matter how hard the situation may be, once you decide, you need to stick to it by working hard! And that is my gift to you today as well.

As the great writer James Baldwin said: "Your crown has been bought and paid for, all you have to do is put it on your head." I offer you my most sincere congratulations and wish you success in your chosen careers. Your future is in your hands, grab the opportunities right in front of you -- and once you decide, just do it!

Thank you!