

24th Gordon Arthur Ransome Oration: Human Solidarity in a Fragmenting World*

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Abstract

Information technology is altering power relationships in human society. The first stage is destructive. Old institutions and hierarchies preserved and sustained by asymmetry, deception, force, hypocrisy, information, ritual and secrecy are being eroded. For example, the social media has forced leaders down from their ivory towers to reveal them for who they are, warts and all. The relationship between parents and children, teachers and students, priests and laity, governments and the governed is changing and causing great stress to traditional society. The old world is fragmenting. The pieces are, however, reconnecting in new ways with patterns that are more akin to neural networks. New nodes are forming with multiple connections in unceasing competition against other nodes. This reconfiguration is still in the initial stages. The gathering and processing of vast amounts of data create new power centres. Edward Snowden revealed the scope of the United States National Security Agency's Prism project. The Chinese government is concentrating on data more than anyone else and is using it not only for surveillance, but also to reduce corruption and to improve governance. Huawei is an example of the covert and overt competition for data at the political level. Commercially, technology conglomerates such as Alibaba, Amazon, Facebook, Google and Tencent have been expanding at the expense of traditional players. There is now a growing political backlash at them. In the West, there are calls to limit their power either by breaking them up or regulating them more tightly, especially in the way they make use of private data. In China, all technology companies know that they cannot run afoul of the Chinese Communist Party. Will big data and artificial intelligence (AI) lead to ever growing concentration of power? Will the future be likened to the dystopian state described in the novel "1984"? Or will clever computer minds succeed in creating decentralised Internet websites and decentralised AI? It takes time for human institutions and relationships to adapt to the revolution in technology. Meanwhile, we can expect a long transition marked by confusion and disruption. Every major advancement in technology is marked by a choice between good and evil. Our moral sense is struggling to catch up with the new powers that are being unleashed upon us.

Introduction

I first heard of Professor Ransome from my older brother, Peter, who is 7 years my senior. When he was in medical school, I was in secondary school and shared a room with him in our old house at East Coast Terrace. He would often tell me stories about this remarkable English doctor who could diagnose diseases accurately, often based only on observation, palpation and even smell.

When Dr Sayampanathan asked me early last year if I could deliver the Gordon Arthur Ransome Oration, the name resonated with me immediately and my mind raced back to the stories I heard a long time ago. I thank the Academy of Medicine, Singapore, for giving me this signal honour.

This oration was originally intended to be delivered in Hong Kong last December in conjunction with an event jointly organised by the Academies of Medicine of Malaysia, Hong Kong and Singapore. Unfortunately, that event was cancelled due to the unrest in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong

No one expected the protests which began in June last year to become so big and to last so long. As a legislator of many years, I decided to download the Extradition Bill and read it for myself. Frankly, I did not find the proposed amendments to existing laws unreasonable. It did not seem right that one could commit murder or rape in China and still find refuge in Hong Kong.

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However, most Hong Kong residents viewed the Bill differently and were outraged that the Chief Executive, Carrie Lam, was determined to get it passed despite mass opposition. Looking back, the Bill was only the spark that set off a forest fire. For many years after the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997, the fuel load in the forest had been building up. Social injustice had gotten worse. Most parents in Hong Kong no longer believed that their children could do better than them. As a result, there is not a sense of hope and without a sense of hope, society turns sour. The lack of affordable housing is egregious.

Under British rule, the Hong Kong civil service was conditioned to take instructions from London. The British approach was to govern firmly but lightly unless their core interests were affected, leaving the people of Hong Kong to fend for themselves. After 1997, Beijing allowed Hong Kong to govern herself without giving her instructions the way London did. However, the Hong Kong administration changed little; vested interests remained comfortably in place and political leadership was lacking. Hong Kong has a well developed economic and social establishment, but not a political establishment. Under the British, it was not desirable for Hong Kong to have her own political culture. Perhaps China should have been more interventionist after 1997 but for various reasons—including the selfish interest of groups from the Chinese Mainland which found Hong Kong's separate status convenient—she let things be.

Worse, the people of Hong Kong had to struggle with an identity crisis. Older Hong Kong residents who fled the Chinese Mainland during earlier periods of political upheaval—founding of communist China in 1949, the Great Leap Forward, mass famine of the early 1960s, the Cultural Revolution and Tiananmen massacre on 4 June 1989—greatly distrusted Beijing. The majority of teachers from Primary One to University are anti-Mainland and taught their prejudices against China, especially against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), to their charges. To be a student leader in university, you need to honour the date June 4. Most Hong Kong residents know that they cannot be independent, but many prefer not to identify themselves as Chinese citizens. At the top, they hold multiple passports.

When the late President Deng Xiaoping proposed “One Country, Two Systems”, the precondition for this model to work was that Hong Kong residents must not only love Hong Kong, but they must also love China. In fact, the love of China should come first, but it takes time and much effort for it to be put right. In Hong Kong, national education has been neglected for far too long.

After I left the civil service in Singapore in 2011, I joined Robert Kuok in Hong Kong. My wife and I shuttled back and forth between Hong Kong and Singapore. For us, Hong Kong has become a second home. We now have our own

social circle there including a number of young Hong Kong residents who are interested in politics. Some of them are yellow, some are blue, but all feel deeply for Hong Kong. For me and my wife, we have developed an affection for Hong Kong and her people and had decided, after my retirement as Chairman of Kerry Logistics last year, to buy an apartment near Hong Kong University. Like many others, we were shocked by the rapid deterioration in the situation in Hong Kong in the past 8 months. Unlike many others, we remain cautiously optimistic about Hong Kong's long-term future because of her special position in relation to China and the resilience of her people.

It is, however, not my intention to talk primarily about Hong Kong today. The reason for raising the subject of Hong Kong is because there are deeper, larger forces at work in Hong Kong that affect the whole world. We must be mindful of these forces because they affect us here in Singapore too. These forces are unleashed by technology and challenge us morally. I would like to highlight four of these—the social media revolution, fragmentation and reconfiguration of human society, growing wealth and income inequality and mass manipulation by new masters of the universe.

Social Media Revolution

When the Internet arrived in the 1990s, many viewed it as liberating. It became much easier to access information. Patients have already Googled their symptoms before they meet their physicians, and everything the doctor said and prescribed could be verified on the Internet. In the same way, teachers are challenged by students and government leaders by the citizenry. At home, parents have come to accept that for many things and in many areas, they have to rely on their children for advice and information.

The social media revolution has disrupted old relationships. Everywhere, we see hierarchies breaking down. Old institutions—once preserved and sustained by asymmetry, deception, force, hypocrisy, information, ritual and secrecy—are being eroded. Traditional leaders are dragged down from their ivory towers and are shown to be fallible and ordinary folks after their corruption and hypocrisy were exposed by ubiquitous cameras and microphones.

When Pope Francis smacked an Asian lady twice on the arm after she grabbed him by his sleeve in St. Peter's Square and refused to let go, it immediately became news throughout the world. The Pope quickly apologised a day later. A Chinese Mainland friend of mine told me that it actually made the Pope look good because it showed him to be human. It is just as well that Francis, since becoming the Pope, frequently declares himself a sinner.

Old leadership models have become obsolete. Whether it is Pope Francis, President Donald Trump, Prime Minister

Boris Johnson, Elon Musk or Greta Thunberg, we are in a new situation. It does seem, sometimes, that a necessary qualification for leadership is to be viewed publicly as a sinner. The term used nowadays is “authenticity” although that, too, is often manufactured.

Fragmentation and Reconfiguration of Human Society

Human society takes time to adjust to new technologies. The information technology (IT) revolution shows no sign of abating. In fact, it is setting off concomitant change in other technological fields such as biomedicine, material science and manufacturing. These changes, in turn, act upon one another—often in unexpected ways—that cause even more disruptions to the old order.

In his analysis of economic cycles, the Austrian economist, Joseph Schumpeter, wrote about creative destruction. What we see around us is the destructive phase of the technological revolution that is fragmenting human society. This fragmentation, which is the second force I am highlighting today, defines the age that we live in.

Going back to Hong Kong, what characterises the protest movement in that territory is its fluid, leaderless and organic character. The social media reinforces beliefs and biases. Those who are yellow watch yellow sites, become angrier and even more yellow. For many, police officers have become the villains and even their families are targeted. For those who are blue, the demonstrators are cockroaches that must be brought down. Views become absurdly and highly polarised. We hear of couples breaking up and parents who are no longer on talking terms with their children. Unmediated positive feedback loops quickly and become unstable. The same phenomenon is observed in the United States (US) today, Taiwan during her recent elections, the United Kingdom when the Brexit debate was raging and in many other countries.

Fragmentation is, however, not the end state. Gradually, the fragments recombine in new ways that are similar to the pattern of neural networks. Nodes grow and compete with other nodes with which they are linked through multiple pathways. There is a biological quality to these new forms of organisation. It is almost as if we are witnessing a Cambrian explosion of diverse organisational species. Those that adapt successfully to the new environment proliferate while others reach a dead end. Apple, Huawei and Samsung have very different organisational structures and systems. No one can foretell which of them will still be successful ten years from now, but for sure there will be new winners and losers.

With loss of faith in existing institutions, there has been a trend of reversion to tribal networks of trust. Some of these networks are based on ethnicity and religion. In his book “Tribes”, Joel Koetkin described the tribal networks

that undergird global commerce such as those of the Armenians, Chinese, Jains, Jews, Mormons and Parsees. Among the Chinese, there are regional networks that stand out such as the Wenzhou connection. We also see new tribal networks form around specific causes such as the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender movement, climate activism and even veganism.

There is an obverse and negative side to this phenomenon. Networks such as Al Qaeda and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria have similar morphologies but are destructive. Anti-Semitism has also become more pronounced and it is being fuelled by groups that supported each other’s prejudices on the Internet. Whether negative or positive, politicians everywhere are quick to take up populist causes in order to win votes. This has undermined civil society which is the bedrock of democracy.

Political systems are subjected to the same type of creative destruction. Western democratic systems no longer function well. Long-established political parties are fissuring. In many democracies, domestic political debates have become toxic. The apparent success of China’s political system is an affront to Western liberal democracies. China’s brand of authoritarian communism is not supposed to work well. Yet it has lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty and enabled her to join the front rank of nations in many fields. This has caused the US to view her as a strategic threat. China views its own system as unique and does not seek to export it to other countries. However, her relative success does give hope and heart to many developing countries that there are other ways to forge a future for themselves. They do not have to take the path of Western liberal democracies. I say “relative success” because China, too, faces enormous challenges. Political systems and organisations that are unable to evolve to meet new needs become dysfunctional and unstable. Thus, at all levels—from family to companies to political structures—we continue to see experimentation, fragmentation and reconfiguration. It is a process that can be described as Darwinian.

Growing Wealth and Income Inequality

The third force that is impacting society today is growing wealth and income inequality. Wealth and income inequality in Hong Kong are important underlying causes of the current unrest. According to a recent study by the Asian Competitiveness Institute at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, inequality has worsened in recent years. Without a strong injection of socialism, Hong Kong society will remain fractured.

The problem is not confined to Hong Kong but it is a global phenomenon. The impact of technological change on individual fortunes is uneven. When once hardworking

and responsible employees could expect their lives to improve from year to year, many today feel that they are struggling to climb a downward-moving escalator. Those whose jobs are repetitive are at great risk since their jobs can be replaced by algorithms and robots or outsourced to countries where labour is cheaper.

In contrast, those who are well placed to seize new opportunities created by fragmentation prosper. For example, among new graduates, computer engineers command some of the highest salaries. Many companies continue to remain stuck in the past. Those who are able to disrupt them become rich and are lionised. When we look at a list of the most successful companies in the world, the top positions are increasingly held by those in technology. Sea Ltd, a company based in Singapore that specialises in gaming and online commerce—which most Singaporeans have never heard of—has suddenly become one of the top companies with a capital value that is only half of that of Singapore Telecommunications Ltd, a major telco in the island state.

After the Global Financial Crisis of 1997, the flood of global liquidity released by central banks had unfairly benefitted a relatively small group of companies and individuals, thereby accentuating wealth and income inequality throughout the world. Those who are well connected to governments and wealthy families—especially in high finance and technology—are able to access cheap money while the great majority of small and medium enterprises pay higher interest rates. Inflation in asset prices have skewed wealth further to those who are already wealthy. In many developing countries, those who have already invested in asset classes such as property become richer while the rest struggle to buy their first home. This is being perpetuated down one generation. Many successful start-ups are founded by young men and women who are themselves scions of wealthy and well connected families.

Growing inequality in income and wealth exacerbates existing class and ethnic divisions in society. In many countries, large groups resent being systematically disadvantaged and left behind. This frustration, though still inchoate, has become widespread. “Yellow jacket” protests in France are part of this phenomenon. There are eerie similarities between the protests in Hong Kong and those that take place far away in Barcelona and Santiago.

Mass Manipulation by New Masters of the Universe

The fourth force that challenge us is the way big data and the social media are used to manipulate the way we think. The first phase of the Internet revolution opened the floodgates to information access and eroded old power structures. For a short while, there was an exhilarating sense

of equalisation. That phase has ended. We are increasingly discovering how our minds are being manipulated by new masters of the universe.

Companies such as Alibaba, Amazon, Facebook, Google and Tencent make use of the enormous data they collect to force out competitors and to influence our preferences, often without our knowledge. In Singapore and elsewhere, a very high percentage of revenue from advertisements is cornered by Facebook and Google because of the high number of views they have captured.

A few weeks after the unrest in Hong Kong started, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube blocked—in quick succession—hundreds of sites that they claimed had besmirched protesters. They also insisted that these sites originated from China. Sites that supported the protesters remained untouched. It is unclear who made these decisions, but I do not think that they were made in Hong Kong. There is no doubt that the way friction is increased or reduced in different parts of the Internet can significantly sway public opinion. Shackled by an old mindset, the Hong Kong government was unable or unwilling to intervene.

Other governments have no such inhibitions. India routinely shuts down the Internet in various cities to calm public anger when there are riots. Kashmir was denied the Internet for months, a decision which the Indian Supreme Court judged unlawful earlier this week. When mass demonstrations erupted in Iran after fuel prices were raised, the Iranian government turned off Facebook. This led to threats of sanctions by US Secretary of State, Michael Pompeo, against those responsible. In the battle for hearts and minds in Iran, the US actively intervenes in the way Facebook, Instagram and Twitter cover developments in the country. Sympathetic coverage of the late Iranian General Qasem Suleimani, who was assassinated by US forces in early January 2020, has been systematically blocked.

The big powers devote considerable resources to the exploitation of social media for political purposes. Domestically, they may be constrained by national law. Externally, there are no restrictions. In 2013, Edward Snowden revealed the existence of Prism, an incredible system developed by the US National Security Agency (NSA) to collect Internet information worldwide. All governments would love to have such a capability but none can hope to do so like the US—and certainly not on the same scale—except, possibly, China one day.

A key reason for the US campaign against Huawei is the fear that China may not only develop a similar surveillance capability, but Chinese equipment and Chinese systems will make it harder for the US to maintain the same surveillance reach. For countries such as Singapore, the only safe assumption is that all systems expose us to external intelligence penetration. We must find ways to

protect ourselves and accept that nothing is foolproof. The challenge is made much harder with a growing dependence on cloud computing.

China makes no pretence about her efforts to control the Internet. President Xi Jinping has declared that the development of the Internet is an integral part of national development and is not separate from it. All Internet service providers in China accept the leadership of the CCP. They have no choice. In fact, China is probably the first country to make extensive use of big data for national governance. Big data analysis has enabled China to overcome a problem that has afflicted its governance system for centuries. Due to the vast size of the country, there are too many layers of administration that have made it hard for Beijing to know what is happening on the ground. Corrupt officials often succeed in covering up problems by working with counterparts one level above them to suppress complaints. When problems do reach the central government, it is because they have already become too big and serious. To address this issue, various Chinese dynasties had developed elaborate systems of inspection. While wrongdoings had been addressed, they were so rare that their stories were immortalised in Chinese operas. With big data analysis, it is easier for Beijing to be alerted earlier. Information systems monitor the overall shape of data. When there are signs of inflammation, Beijing zooms in to find details. When officials at lower levels know that it is hard to cover up, they behave better. In fact, security agencies such as NSA use similar methods to spot potential terrorist attacks by monitoring Internet chatter.

China has been criticised by the Muslim and Western nations for the way she collects and uses information in Xinjiang province, including the mass deployment of facial recognition. Whether the Chinese method of curbing terrorism is more effective than the Western method of acting forcefully only when the evidence has become clear is still an intriguing question. The difference is not unlike the methods that are used to treat cancer. The Western method of tackling terrorism is akin to chemotherapy and surgery, such as the use of predator drones to kill terrorists. The Chinese method is to treat the body politic holistically and gradually boosts its immunity. Immunotherapy, however, requires patience and a deeper understanding of complex reality.

For many Westerners, China has become the dystopian state described by George Orwell in his novel “1984”. For many Chinese, the loss of privacy is a price worth paying for the promise of convenience and safety. There is probably no bigger country that is as safe as China today. But will the centralisation of control lead to massive abuse one day? The CCP is not immune to the same forces of change sweeping the world. It must evolve to respond to

new circumstances. By cracking down on corruption and re-establishing moral authority, President Xi Jinping has bought time for China and the CCP.

In the US, what intelligence and law enforcement agencies are allowed to do is the subject of a raging debate. President Donald Trump has raged against fake news since he embarked on his presidential campaign in 2016. Is the deep state out of control? Well, it depends on who you ask. There is also a growing backlash against the big technology companies. Democratic Party candidate Elizabeth Warren is campaigning for their breakup and it has alarmed the founder and Chief Executive Officer of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg. She is a policy wonk and has thought through the implications of such a move.

In Europe, the General Data Protection Regulation—commonly known as GDPR—came into force two years ago. It provides some form of safeguard against the abuse or misuse of data collection. This may make it more difficult for Europe to catch up with China and the US in artificial intelligence (AI). However, it is unlikely that the use of facial recognition technology will be discouraged since it is proven to be useful.

Thus, we see in the world today a range of responses to the challenge of big data, particularly the loss of privacy and mass manipulation of public opinion. In Singapore, the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act—commonly known as POFMA—is a brave attempt to stem the same incoming tide. It is not easy, but we should not stop trying.

Moral Challenge

The revolution in IT is enabling the collection, processing and storage of data on an unprecedented scale. It is almost as if nothing that happens will ever be forgotten again. In China, to ensure better disease control, there is an effort to identify every pig either facially or from its posterior. Pigs number almost half a billion in China. For computer engineers, this number is a trivial problem. Each detail of every human alive on earth today and beyond will eventually be analysed, monitored and recorded. With AI, one’s likely behaviour can be easily predicted. It is a scary prospect.

This leap in the collective intelligence of humans has a god-like quality to it. There does not seem to be any phenomenon which we—as a species—cannot potentially understand. (As an aside, I do not believe that the kind of AI Elon Musk talks about can replace collective human intelligence. AI requires either sufficient past data about collective human behaviour in order to predict the future or rules of collective human behaviour that can be repeatedly simulated. Neither condition exists. The history of human civilisation is too short and too complex for AI to ever master.)

What the technological revolution has unleashed is, however, a double-edged sword. There is always a temptation to weaponise the newest technology in order to gain a military advantage. In the biological world, you either produce or take away from someone what he or she has produced. Anything which lives must solve the dual challenge of production and security. Thus, every new technology is used for both creation and destruction, and for good and evil.

It takes time for the moral sense in humans to catch up with new technologies and to tame them. In the last century, mass production, mechanisation and nuclear energy led to the slaughter of over 100 million people. Whether we will be wiser this century is still open to debate. There is an air of hubris in the way the new masters of the universe view their growing capabilities. This hubris infects us at all levels: state agencies that are carried away with the use of technology; politicians who rely on clever data analytics to manipulate voters; generals who fantasise about impregnable shields and unstoppable spears; economists who believe that the manipulation of money supply can rid us of economic cycles; corporate leaders whose ambitions know no bounds; successful tribes and wealthy individuals who are convinced of their own genetic superiority; scientists who tinker with germ lines to improve the quality of human beings; and computer engineers who see AI as the ultimate.

Memento Mori

It has been said that during the Roman empire, a victorious general in a triumphal procession would have behind him a slave who would whisper into his ears the words “memento mori”, which means “remember, you will die”. It is a warning against hubris, a call to humility and restraint when one is successful.

Whether as corporate leaders, doctors, government ministers, parents or teachers, we must therefore not lose our moral sense in the pursuit of achievement and success. It is important to contemplate human weakness and the meaning of death and suffering. It is in pathos that we forge group solidarity. In an age of fragmentation, solidarity is vital. In everything that we do, we must not ignore those who are wounded or have fallen by the wayside. Without this social glue, civilised society breaks down.

Tectonic changes have caused old edifices to crumble down into smaller pieces. We must rebuild, but with the expectation that the ground will continue to quake. We need simpler structures that are linked to one another in a flexible way, much like those in a Middle Eastern souk. Above all, we need solidarity which is the instinct to bond and connect.

Solidarity

Human society cannot be organised based only on laws and the market. Laws only mark outer boundaries. They can require parents to look after their children, but cannot make parents love their children or vice versa. The market is a powerful means to allocate resources in a complex economy, but it alone cannot solve many human problems. We are all familiar with Adam Smith’s “invisible hand”, but we often forget that he was—first and foremost—a moral philosopher. Take the healthcare system, for example. If doctors are only bound to their patients by the money nexus, many diseases will be poorly treated or mistreated regardless of how clever AI systems become eventually.

Human society needs solidarity to become a cohesive force that binds humans to a cooperative effort. In the teachings of Confucius, he emphasised five core values: benevolence, justice, proper behaviour, trust and wisdom. All moral systems elaborate and incorporate these values. They are ingrained in human nature and are probably encoded within our genetic makeup.

To remain relevant, these moral systems—including ideology and religion—must adapt to new challenges thrown up by technology. Take proper behavior as an example. For humans to interact, we need protocols that facilitate communication and cooperation. When individuals mask their identities, whether in public or on the Internet, protocols are hard to establish. In anonymous situations, individuals quickly become abusive and irresponsible. Civilised behaviour requires appropriate responses that are generally accepted by all and are, therefore, predictable. Interestingly, it is protocols such as Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol that has led to the creation of the Internet in the first place. The fact of the matter is that there can be no freedom without accountability. With no moral sense, the new freedom that technology offers destroys itself.

At the heart of the situation in Hong Kong today is a moral crisis. Two nights ago in Hong Kong, I had dinner with Gary Wong, a young Hong Kong political leader whom I have known for some years. Together with Jasper Tsang, former President of Legco, Raymond Mak—another young political leader whom I had dinner with the night Hong Kong Polytechnic University was encircled by police forces—and five others, they decided in the late evening of 18 November to enter the university which was then surrounded by the Hong Kong police to persuade the few hundred remaining diehard protestors to leave. They made the decision after receiving a WhatsApp message from a young woman in the university which was a heartrending plea for help. After consulting government leaders, the police allowed the group to enter the campus, but on the understanding that the police could not ensure their safety.

Indeed, they were greeted by arrows that were drawn and pointed at them as they crossed the barricades. The campus was a war zone. They were shocked to realise that among the protestors, many were well educated and some were from well-to-do families. Some of the girls were as young as 12 years old. Eventually, they succeeded in persuading 70 protestors to leave the campus. There were loud cheers when they left, not only from the crowd gathered outside the university, but from many Hong Kong residents who had watched the drama unfolded on social media and television. Chief Executive Carrie Lam made the wise decision to allow those below the age of 18 to return home after they had reported their names to the authorities.

The polarisation of Hong Kong society had reached a point when protestors who wanted to leave the campus did not believe they could trust the authorities enough to do so. The majority of Hong Kong youth have developed a visceral antipathy toward the Hong Kong police, yet it was not so long ago that the Hong Kong police was rated as being one of the best in the world. On the other hand, for many who are in positions of authority and the older generation, there is anger and grief vis-a-vis a younger generation that had seemingly turned wayward. It will take time to clean the wounds and for the wounds to heal. China has despatched former Party Secretary of Qinghai and Shanxi, Luo Huining, to Hong Kong. He is new to Hong Kong and will bring

a fresh mind to bear on the problems in the territory. He will have to work with Hong Kong leaders—who showed moral and physical courage and wisdom during the recent crisis—to restore solidarity in Hong Kong and between Hong Kong and the Chinese Mainland.

In every field, we need moral leadership. The great danger facing us today is that the revolution in technology will outpace the development of moral sense. Whether in the people, private or public sector, we should never de-emphasise moral considerations when grappling with economic and technical issues. Nowadays, it is common for decisions to be taken in an amoral way. An amoral, indifferent approach in a time of rapid technological change is possibly the greatest danger faced by mankind today. We must not be beguiled by a so-called post-truth world. The more complex the world becomes, the more we must affirm that which is at the core of our humanity.

The human quality of Professor Gordon Arthur Ransome—as described by Professor Seah Cheng Siang—is therefore worth recalling: “He is always ready to render a helping hand when a fellow doctor himself is in trouble ... he has an ever constant ear which in itself is therapy. Time appears to him to be of no consequence when it comes to giving it to someone else. The distressed talks on and he listens. A few carefully chosen words of advice now and then provide the panacea.”