

The first class and the last class I taught at HKU

This morning I taught my last class as a regular faculty member of HKU. There is always a first time and a last time to everything. I remember vividly the first class I conducted in HKU back in the autumn of 1975, as I will remember vividly this last class.

On August 13, 1975 I reported for duty to the head of department, the late Professor Y.C. Wong. He informed me that I would be assigned to teach the course "Operations Research II", a subject unknown to me. The specific topic he told me to teach was queueing theory; again I was on unfamiliar ground. When I explained the situation to Professor Wong, he suggested that I could start to learn it on my own. His advice served me in good stead. The next day I started to learn probability theory, which up to then was a subject foreign to me. (Today's undergraduates are more knowledgeable than I was back then; I did not even know what a "random variable" meant.) My colleague CL (CHAN), now retired, gave me a copy of Cooper's *Introduction to Queueing Theory*. My old pal and classmate Kin (LAM), who at the time was in Department of Statistics (he is now the Head of Department of Finance & Decision Sciences at the HK Baptist University), helped me tremendously. For most afternoons during the month before the academic year began we held study sessions to prepare me for the year ahead. I continued to learn probability theory by sitting in the classes taught by CL and by Kin. (By the way, I can claim to have achieved the highest (100%) attendance rate!)

At the same time as sitting in those courses on probability and statistics, I was teaching queueing theory to my students. In the first class I conducted in HKU, I went into the classroom and told the students that I was learning the subject just as they were, only with the advantage of a head start of one month, and if I could do it then so could they. Little would I imagine that this honest display of ignorance would lead to my first MPhil student, Po (TONG), choosing me to be his supervisor. (Years later, Po told me he selected me to be his supervisor because of that beginning remark I made in the first class.) The study on probability theory also led Ming Ying (LEUNG) to become my second MPhil student, so I really have to thank Professor Wong for assigning me to teach queueing theory.

That was the first class I taught at HKU. This morning I taught my last class “Mathematics: A Cultural Heritage”. I was greatly surprised, and very touched, when at the end of class a girl came out to the front of the room and announced that, as it was my final lecture before my retirement, the class wished to thank me for what I had taught them during the course. The students presented me with a card they made themselves with lots of messages of goodwill written in it. Their knowledge of my love of history was evident by the design of the card, although it had me “sweating with embarrassment (han yan 汗顏) as they had given my name prominence among a host of names of great mathematicians in history. A boy presented me with a Möbius band with the phrase "teaching for three decades" written on it, with an intended meaning that this will continue without end. The final moments of my last class were filled with laughter and smiling faces as the students took turns taking photos with me.

I always say, no matter how the environment and mood of the tertiary sector may change for better or for worse, there are three places that I love and feel comfortable — the classroom, the library and the swimming pool. This memorable last class confirms my belief.

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