

Honorary Doctor of Social Science

Mrs Rita FAN HSU Lai-tai

Citation written and delivered by Professor Julia TAO LAI Po-wah

Pro-Chancellor:

Aristotle (384–322 BCE), the ancient Greek philosopher, says in *Politics* that men are born to rule, women to be ruled. According to Aristotle, women are to be excluded from matters of the Polis, the political organization where men meet as equal and free citizens to draw up laws for the state and practice the art of politics. The Polis is however no place for women; women belong to the household and the private sphere. This is because men alone of all animals have the power of reason. They alone should participate in the government of a state. Law making, the dispensation of justice, and the upholding of order in a political society are not the business of women because women do not possess the power of reason. The business of women is procreation and household management. Aristotle agrees with the ancient poet, Sophocles (495–406 BCE), that “silence brings credit to a woman”. Since such views are not restricted to ancient Greece alone, it is no wonder that women have always been silenced, without a voice in politics, excluded from participation in political life in the long history of human kind.

Gender inequality in politics is still prevalent in the 21st century, even though we have traveled more than 2,000 years from Aristotle’s ancient Polis to contemporary liberal democratic society. But we know now that Aristotle was wrong. Mrs Rita Fan and many of her contemporaries have proved that women are not to be confined to the domestic sphere of the home. Neither can they be deterred by the deeply entrenched gender bias in our culture from making their voice of reason heard in the governing process of our society.

Everything we know about Mrs Rita Fan and the distinguished political career she has achieved for herself, clearly demonstrates that women are in full possession of the power of reason and can use it to deliberate and judge, as free and equal citizens with their male counterparts, to achieve self-rule for our society.

Mrs Fan began her political career as a Legislative Councillor in 1983. In 1989 she was appointed as a member of the Executive Council. She remained a member

of both Councils until 1992. During the critical years from 1993 to 1997, she served first as a member of the Preliminary Working Committee, and then as a member of the Preparatory Committee for the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, which was to be set up after the 1997 handover to Chinese rule. During the transitional years from 1997 to 1998, she became the President of the Provisional Legislative Council. From 1998 to 2004 she was twice elected President of the Legislative Council set up under the new Basic Law of Hong Kong. In 2004 she was returned to the post of President of the Legislative Council a third time after winning over 65,000 votes in a direct election. Since 1998 she has served as Hong Kong Deputy to the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, in addition to numerous other distinguished public services, including the supervising adviser to the Hong Kong Federation of Women.

Mrs Fan's political career overlapped with a period of serious challenges to the stability of Hong Kong's political system because of the transition to the "One Country, Two Systems" framework, a political transformation that had not been attempted before. It was the best of times for Hong Kong, because of the promise of change and greater autonomy; it was the worst of times, because of uncertainty and the threat of instability.

As the President of Hong Kong's highest law-making authority, Mrs Fan understands her role in upholding the principle of free deliberation while, at the same time, maintaining order and due procedure to be essential to the long-term stability of our political system. In the face of an increasingly vocal and pluralistic society, she seeks to build a culture of free debate based upon reason and shared rules, to support autonomy, self-government and democratization in Hong Kong.

As the first woman President, her vision of Hong Kong is a society governed by reason, where citizens have the freedom to explain their reasons and will listen to the reasons of others. She believes that such respect for reason in public deliberation is the foundation of democratic self-rule. John Rawls, the famous American political philosopher, has termed this ideal "the ideal of public reason" (1997). Public reason is a civic duty that we owe to one another as free and equal citizens. This involves the freedom to explain one's reasons, and the willingness to listen to others, to make collective judgment about fundamental matters of principles and policies.

Mrs Fan believes that the Legislative Council should be the exemplar of public reason. "My role is to maintain due process and fairness by upholding public

reason and to give equal consideration and respect to different voices in our society on fundamental matters of principles and policies,” she said.

Such a practice of public reason can serve to adjudicate disputes and promote diversity in an increasingly vocal and pluralistic society. Diversity and peaceful resolutions to disputes depend on deep respect for the values of free speech, public reason and self-rule. Mrs Fan believes that politics and education should help the younger generation to learn and practice these important values.

Mrs Fan recalls that she first learnt these values from her teachers because they treated her as a person with a capacity for reason. She remembers the one time she played truancy. She went to the cinema with some classmates instead of doing her homework in the library. Mrs Fan was expecting to be punished. Instead, the principal asked her to explain her behavior in terms of right and wrong and suggest how the school should handle the situation. The principal’s actions might have taken her by surprise but they instilled in her a sense of respect for others and for oneself.

“I have come to believe that a democratic society should uphold these basic values of our common humanity. I also believe that our education system should inculcate these values in our younger generation. Education should be education for the ‘whole person’,” she said.

This is the educational philosophy she advocated in the Education Commission Reports Nos. 4 & 5, produced under her leadership as Chair of the Education Commission of Hong Kong between 1990 and 1992. She believes the goal of education is not only to prepare the younger generations for a career, but also for life and participation as free and equal citizens.

While Aristotle was wrong about women in politics, he was right when he said reason must be used with prudence and virtue in politics, to discern justice, to uphold order, and to rule for the common good. Mrs Fan understands Aristotle’s wisdom concerning the art of rule. As a holder of public office, she realizes the importance of self-vigilance (*shendu*), a virtue long cherished by ancient Chinese Confucian scholars. She is aware of the duty she owes the public and is prudent in exercising her authority.

“I cannot say that I have always succeeded in my duty as the President of the Council. On reflection, I realise that there are occasions when I could have done

better to uphold reason and fair procedures. As someone in public office, I should be prudent, self-reflective and self-aware. I hold fast to the belief that before I can ask for perfection in others, I should try to perfect myself first,” Mrs Fan said.

When her husband became ill and subsequently passed away in November last year, she did not miss a single session of the Council’s weekly meeting. Although she deeply felt the loss of her husband, Mrs Fan continued to chair her regular weekly Legislative Council meeting with grace and equanimity. She never had a moment’s doubt that this was how he would have wanted her to be. She knew in her heart that he would not have wished it otherwise.

She takes comfort in knowing that her husband will always be with her. He supported her throughout her 20 years in politics, especially during her election campaign even when he was already very weak. He had always been a source of strength to her. Mrs Fan herself had surgery for breast cancer in 2001. She also donated a kidney to her daughter in 1995. Sickness and death have become as natural to her as giving birth and growing old. She takes life as it comes.

Mrs Fan reminds us of the ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi (369–286 BCE) who, when his wife died, beat a drum and sang instead of being overwhelmed with grief. She has shown that she understands the eternal. Such understanding does not take away, but pays tribute to, her love for her husband.

It is because of her humanity that even when she is promoting public reason for democratic self-rule, Mrs Fan never neglects the values of care and education as the foundations of a truly liberal society. For this vision, she has devoted her life to improving our education system and our political institution. She is an inspiration to women who aspire to politics; a source of strength to those who champion whole person education; and a source of wisdom to those who want a free and equal society.

In recognition of her outstanding contribution to the well-being of our society, I have the distinct pleasure of presenting Mrs Rita Fan Hsu Lai-tai to you, Mr Pro-Chancellor, for the award of the degree of Doctor of Social Science, *honoris causa*.