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Tribute to Sir James Mirrlees

It was serendipity that brought me along the journey with Morningside College. The class that I was teaching happened to be held at a convenient time and place when Dr. Gerald Chan visited the CUHK campus, over a decade ago, when Morningside College was but an idea. Of course, it was Morningside College's good fortune that Professor Sir James Mirrlees agreed to be its Founding Master, and my great fortune to have the opportunity to work with him.

With Sir James at the helm, Morningside became a very special College. He was steadfast in his vision of what a College should be. Against the nay-saying in the background and even open opposition, he pushed -- ever graciously yet tenaciously -- to change the rules and conventions of CUHK so that Morningside would fulfil his vision. The many Vice-Chancellors, Pro-Vice-Chancellors, Deans and Heads here can certainly attest that being able to change CUHK "traditions" is no mean accomplishment!

Permit me to describe a bit the College that Sir James built. At Morningside, at Sir James' insistence, the Assembly of Fellows includes all teaching members of the College. Junior faculty and senior faculty are equally involved in the administration of the College. Through the many College events and Fellows' lunches, camaraderie among the Assembly of Fellows is strong, and several academic collaborations across disciplines have burgeoned and grown.

At Morningside, the student body includes a much higher proportion of students from Mainland China and a much higher proportion of students from overseas. Every non-local student is matched with a local-student roommate; the CUHK ideal of bilingualism (two languages and 3 dialects) is realised at Morningside. Openness to other cultures are encouraged, and I am proud to say that no Morningside student would ever feel marginalised.

At Morningside, the College General Education tutorials and service-learning trips are led by Junior Fellows, graduates mainly from overseas residing in College. By Sir James' design, Junior Fellows are a unique feature of Morningside College. Being of "postgraduate" age and with diverse experience, they together with the Resident Tutors serve as the "Middle Common Room" of the College, adding much to the richness of the profile of the Morningside community.

At Morningside, students reside in College throughout their undergraduate years, and the entire College dine together three evenings a week. Sir James always took the time to attend communal dinners. At every meal, he invited students to sit with him at the Fellows' Table, engaging them in conversations about world affairs and their lives. By example, he taught us all that a life of intellectual inquiry should be lived 24/7 (at College and even beyond). For him, curiosity, thinking and analysis were never restricted to just the classroom or workplace.

At Morningside, music and the arts are encouraged. A cultural exploration fund was established to enable students to attend the many concerts and arts events in Hong Kong. Sir James himself was an accomplished pianist, and musical performances by our students are often featured at communal dinners in College.

Morningside College was indeed fortunate to have as its Founding Master the intellectual giant --- a very gentle giant --- that was Sir James. What I am most grateful for is the care and attention he devoted to Morningside College, despite the very many demands on his time from institutions and governments all around the world. His clear analyses of situations were enlightening; his compassion extremely touching. As many of you well know, he always insisted that everyone call him "Jim", and not Sir James.

Sir James was a true gentleman and scholar. He always upheld the highest academic standards for himself and others. For many Morningsiders, the admissions interview with Sir James remain an unforgettable intellectual experience --- one former student tells me he still has nightmares about not being able to answer Sir James' tough questions. Indeed, some of my friends who had been students and colleagues of Sir James, who are themselves distinguished professors now, still remember vividly the trepidation they felt as they climbed the stairs to Sir James' room at Nuffield College, Oxford for their tutorials and meetings. Yet Jim was ever so gentle when he had to chastise anyone.

In my own case, before my very first lunch meeting with him, I was gripped with the same fear as before a one-on-one tutorial at Oxford. I was afraid I would embarrass myself, revealing my lack of

knowledge and experience in College administration, and my lack of table manners! Somehow Jim sensed my anxiety and, with a twinkle in his eye, began to recite a children's poem about "eating peas with honey". That was so typically Jim; his gentle smile putting me at ease at once, yet in the words of the poem telling me exactly how the knife and fork should be used! Time and again, I saw Jim work this magic, making others think, reflect and learn while banishing any embarrassment and lifting their spirits.

All Morningsiders are deeply saddened by the loss of our dear Master, our Jim. When we look around Morningside, we will see the many indelible marks he left, and many things that remind us of him:

- the colour of the College wall so reminiscent of the Cotswold stone buildings of Oxford where Sir James spent many years,
- the baby grand piano in our Dining Hall echoing the many musical evenings in College,
- our dinner gong and the elegant way he struck it just right, etc.

We will remember the many joyous occasions (Master's teas, Formal Hall Dinners and Burns Night Suppers) that we have spent with Jim at Morningside. More importantly, we will remember how he inspired us to strive to be the best in all that we do.

If, as we go forth, we could following in his footsteps, expecting as he did the highest standards of ourselves, seeing the best in others, and always thinking of how we can make the world a better place by what we do, that would be the best way to honour Sir James' memory. If we do that, I think Jim would be quite pleased.