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Prof. Zhou Qifeng Speech
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World Ethics Institute Beijing
Sister of Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies

Speech by President and Professor Zhou Qifeng

His Excellency Prof. Xu Jialu; His Excellency Prof. Hao Ping; His Excellency Dr. Michael Schaefer, Ambassador of Germany to China; His Excellency Mr. Lars Peter Freden, Ambassador of Sweden to China; His Excellency Mr. Krieger Carlo, Ambassador of Luxembourg to China; Distinguished Professor Bernd Engler, Rector of the University of Tübingen; Distinguished Mr. Karl Schlecht; honorable guests, faculty members and students:

Good morning! Today, we gather here for the inauguration ceremony of the World Ethics Institute at Peking University. I would like to extend my warm welcome to all the distinguished guests on the behalf of Peking University. I hope the beautiful autumn scenery on this historical campus will leave you with an unforgettable impression.

As one of the oldest universities in Germany, the University of Tübingen enjoys a history of five hundred and thirty-five years, and has been home to many renowned philosophers, theologians, writers, and scientists, including Hegel, Schelling, Hölderlin, and more than ten Nobel Prize laureates.

Peking University was originally known as the Imperial University of Peking and is one hundred and fourteen years old. Not only has the University been home to such important thinkers as Li Dazhao, Cai Yuanpei, Hu Shi, Liang Shuming, Xiong Shili, Ma Yinchu, and Fei Xiaotong, but it is also where many political movements were born. As Professor Tu Weiming once remarked, there is no other university than Peking University with a history so intimately connected with a nation's future and fate.

Every time I take a stroll around the campus, I feel that I am not only surrounded by the ancient bronze bell, the statue of the jumping fish, the stone sculptures and steles, I am also in the company of the spirits and souls of many great scholars. As a member of the Peking University community, I feel humble and proud at the same time.

The establishment of the World Ethics Institute at Peking University was made possible by the generosity of Mr. Karl Schlecht, Chairman of KS Foundations, and Mr. Liang Wengen, President of SANY, and the assiduous efforts by Professor Hans Küng and Professor Tu Weiming. It is a milestone in the history of collaboration between Peking University and the University of Tübingen, as well as a new opportunity for the studies of world ethics and global economic ethics. I hope that the World Ethics Institute of Peking University will be rooted in traditional Chinese culture; take nourishment from Axial civilizations, non-Axial civilizations, and indigenous cultures, and, through dialogue among civilizations, establish a team of great creativity and originality that combines research and teaching, domestic and international perspectives. It is my hope that the Institute will bring the spiritual wisdom of ancient China and elements of contemporary China—especially the lessons and modules in the economic development of the last thirty years—to the studies of world ethics, and make world ethics, especially economics ethics, more diverse, open, and meaningful on a global scale.

The study of ethics has a long history. Taking moral phenomena as its main subject, the study of ethics has not only attracted many philosophers and great thinkers but also influenced the lives of ordinary people. Interpersonal relationships require not only legal codes, which set the boundaries, but also morality and ethics to maintain and harmonize such relationships. Hence, morality and ethics are the foundation of, and a necessary complement to, the law. Particularly, in situations where it is difficult or inconvenient for the law to intervene, such as family relations and neighborhood negotiations, morality and ethics prove to be far more effective. Since the Industrial Revolution, transportation has become increasingly fast and convenient, facilitating rapidly growing interactions between nations. Inevitably, changes occurred in the global landscape of political economy: as overlaps between different political, economic, and cultural spheres increase, different philosophies and philosophers have to go beyond the boundaries of specialty and geography, face new cultures and new thoughts, observe and analyze different perspectives on the same issues, and contemplate the future and fate of their own nation among all nations in the world.

In the past century, the humankind survived two World Wars and a Cold War, proving that conflicts in ideology and interest could lead humanity to an abyss where people fight and brothers kill one another. Even after the Cold War, the ideological relics of that era still take possession of the civilizations and give rise to what is known as the “clash of civilizations.” Ritual and cultural norms dictate opinions, and could lead to racial discrimination and prejudices, giving rise to the situation where interests dominate values and visions are lost under the pressure of reality. Under this situation, we champion the idea of “world ethics”, which will be a form of moral engagement for the global civil society and an everyday necessity for people’s lives.

For a century now, technology has grown at a remarkable speed. In a world of higher living standards, however, morality fails to keep up with the speed of growing wealth. Man’s life is often dominated by modern concepts, giving rise to pollutions of the natural and the spiritual environment, one exacerbating the other. Ethical issues arising from advanced scientific research such as cloning and genetic engineering have also become important research topics in academia. The line of morality cannot be erased, and science does not equal total truth. What are the collective responsibilities of the humankind? What is the ultimate test for the human race? What exactly is the role of human society on this planet?

These are the questions that the humankind – developed and underdeveloped countries, men and women, the old and the young – should give serious thought to. We should seek answers to these questions from more culturally diverse perspectives and not be confined to the parameters of Western philosophy. As Professor Hans Küng once remarked, if the concept of human rights is a largely Western contribution, then traditional Chinese culture offers the most abundant resource for the concept of “human responsibilities.” New interpretations of the spiritual traditions of ancient China and the construction of a new ethics of human responsibilities depend on new perspectives from Chinese scholars and intellectuals.

Many scholars believe that new interpretations of the spiritual traditions of ancient China, especially Confucianism, greatly inspired the French Enlightenment philosophers, who in turn influenced the Enlightenment in Europe. In today’s global village, the ethical wisdom of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism is no longer local knowledge limited to Asia but also a core value of East Asian civilizations with global significance and a key component for the construction of a world ethics. Therefore, if a new Axial age is to begin, if the humankind is to build a brand new world ethics to face the new challenges and seize the new opportunities,

it needs to take nourishments from the ethical wisdom and philosophical insights of China and the East.

As a leading institution of higher education in China, Peking University is known for its open-mindedness and diversity, creativity and rigor of thought. It inherits the Chinese tradition on the one hand, and engages in incessant innovation on the other. With a rich cultural and academic heritage, Peking University is a major institution in the study of humanities as well as the most accommodating platform for cultural and scholarly exchange in China.

The Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies was established in 2010, with the clearly defined mission of facilitating dialogue among civilizations and deepening multicultural understanding. It has contributed greatly to the development of humanities at Peking University through cross-disciplinary research and exchange.

The World Ethics Institute will be affiliated with the Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies at Peking University. These two Institutes will be two top research organizations working in close collaboration.

I hope that the World Ethics Institute at Peking University will contribute to the promotion of traditional Chinese thought in the context of globalization in the twenty-first century, and to the research on the applications and implications of the spiritual traditions of ancient China on the construction of today's world ethics. I also hope that the World Ethics Institute of Peking University could combine the research on world ethics and teaching together, in a joint effort with the University of Tübingen, cultivate a future generation of cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary scholars.

Last but not least, as President of Peking University, I'd like to express my gratitude to all who have contributed to the establishment of the World Ethics Institute at Peking University. I'd also like to thank all the guests. It is my fervent hope that the World Ethics Institute will carry out its mission, open up a new horizon of scholarly inquiry, and make a unique contribution to the study of world ethics.