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Pomona College Trustee
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Your Royal Highness, ladies and gentlemen,

It's a great pleasure to be invited to say a few words on this wonderful occasion.

Those of you who know me will probably think of me as Bernard Chan, a Pomona alumnus of the class of 1988 who comes from Hong Kong. What you may *not* know is I have another family name, and that is the Thai name Sophonpanich. Out of around a hundred of us in my whole extended family, only ten of us – my parents, brother, sister and all our kids – are from Hong Kong. Our 90 or so uncles, aunts and cousins are nearly all in Bangkok and use the name Sophonpanich. We are basically a Thai family. Her royal highness has known four generations of my family.

I was surprised and delighted when – back in 1997 – the Royal Thai Consul-General in Hong Kong, Khun Rathakit, got in touch with me. He asked if I would like to meet with Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn when she was visiting the city. She was due to attend the handover ceremony of Hong Kong from Britain to China.

Her Royal Highness came a few days beforehand, and the Consulate asked if I could take her hiking in Hong Kong's beautiful countryside.

I have to say that I was a bit nervous. In Thailand, the royal family is treated with great respect, and that usually means a great deal of formality. But I soon found that the Princess is a very warm and easy-going person. In fact, to my surprise, I found that she has a wide range of interests, for example in cultural and environmental areas. We went hiking, and Her Royal Highness took many photographs and asked many questions about the local nature and environment.

I wasn't sure if my answers on Hong Kong's natural surroundings were completely accurate. So I was a bit nervous when I later learned that she had included our hike in a book she put together about her experience of Hong Kong.

Since then, I have had the pleasure of meeting Her Royal Highness on several occasions, and I greatly respect her for her charitable work. She serves as a valued ambassador for the Kingdom of Thailand. She is active in areas like children's education and health. And she is known for her interest in learning about other cultures. She has, for example, developed a serious interest in Chinese language and culture, among many other things.

I remember one time at a dinner, I overheard Her Royal Highness reciting some classical Chinese verse with a leading Chinese official in Hong Kong. I studied classical Chinese with Professor Allan Barr here at Pomona, but I must say that Her Royal Highness puts me to shame in that field.

The key point is that Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn is indeed a true friend of the liberal arts.

This is important because, in the past, it has often seemed that many Asians do not highly value the liberal arts. I do not think this is just a stereotype. Asian students and their parents have a bias towards academic subjects leading to professional qualifications. When I graduated from Pomona 26 years ago, there were very few students from Asia on campus.

However, this is changing. Ten percent of Pomona's students are now international, and that includes a significant proportion of Asians. Several of my own family members have links with Claremont colleges. My older sister was at Claremont Graduate School, and it was she who first brought me here. Since then, one cousin and one niece of mine have come to Claremont campuses.

And when I talk to young people in Asia, there is a growing appreciation of the value of a liberal arts education. I majored in studio art, and yet I have gone on to have a career in business and politics. A liberal arts education, and the social and intellectual environment on campus, made a lot of difference to me and equipped me to do the work I do, the way I do it. I believe Asia in the future will need more people who can think creatively and who can build new approaches to social and economic and business affairs.

I hope that by honoring Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn today, we will in particular help to deepen ties between Pomona and Thailand, and indeed with Asia generally.

I would love to see more faculty and student exchanges between Pomona and Thailand. And I really look forward to seeing more students from Thailand coming here to benefit from, and contribute to, the outstanding academic and community life at Pomona College.

Thank you all very much.