Democracy second to duty: Li Ka-shing

'Prime challenge is nurturing a sense of responsibility'

Quinton Chan

Nurturing responsible citizens is more important than introducing full democracy, according to Li Ka-shing, Hong Kong's richest man.

Giving a rare, detailed glimpse into his political thinking in a speech at the opening of the Li Ka Shing Library at the Singapore Management University in the city state yesterday, Mr Li said a democratic political system was not enough to achieve a "bright and transcendent" society.

He said it was important for people to have a deep sense of responsibility and public duty.

"The prime challenge, as I see it today, is how to nurture responsible citizenship, how to build in the hearts and minds of genuinely progressive young men and women the will as well as the means to carry our true hope for the future," he said.

"If we are to achieve the sustainable dynamism and the flexibility in other successful democracies that enable freedom of choice, breadth of opportunity and a wide range of alternatives, yearning only for the democratic mechanism that serves the rights of their citizens is not enough.

"A flourishing democracy requires the parallel development of the underlying civic habitat that interweaves human mind and spirit, responsibility and reason."

In the speech, entitled "Between Form and Substance", the chairman of Cheung Kong (Holdings) and Hutchison Whampoa stressed that the road to true liberalism "is a long one".

"I know it is fashionable to talk about rights, and the mention of personal duty, duty borne by order and virtue will almost certainly be denigrated with a broad brush. Some even consider the mention of duty and responsibility to be antidemocratic. But they could not be further from the truth," he said.

"We must not succumb to the belief that by merely providing the mechanism of participation we have achieved our goal...structure might hold us together but substance is the essence of a bright and transcendent future."

Ma Ngok, a political scientist at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, said: "What he said is very much akin to the Singaporean style of democracy and political values. This is perhaps why he delivered the speech there."